

# Dignity in the Shadow of Oppression

The abuse and agency of Karen women  
under militarisation



**KHRG**

Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma



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**Karen Human Rights Group  
November 2006**

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**Cover photo:** A displaced woman from Doooplaya District rests, having just crossed the border into Thailand after fleeing from State Law and Order Restoration Council attacks against her home during a large-scale offensive against villagers in February 1997.

**Back cover photo:** A displaced women in Toungoo District after she fled from State Peace and Development Council attacks against her village in April 2006 having taken with her only those possessions that she could carry.

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# Preface

While Burma's successive regimes have for decades pursued aggressive military operations to take control of Karen areas, there has been far too little international attention paid to the atrocities committed against villagers living therein. The increased media coverage and political interest of recent years has tended towards oversimplified accounts where civilians are depicted as passive victims suffering from the unintended side-effects of the military junta's 'anti-insurgency' campaigns. In this light, external representations of Karen women have fallen back on stereotypes of women in armed conflict which depict nothing but their helplessness and vulnerability. Such portrayals neglect the voices of these women and deny them access to the many fora where their lives are discussed and debated. As a consequence, foreign attempts to engage with the situation of Karen women risk adopting strategies completely at odds with the desires of the very individuals they are seeking to help. Alternatively, recognition of Karen women living under militarisation as not only victims of abuse, but also agents of change, allows for the inclusion of their voices in external decision making fora and the development of more appropriate policies of support. This perspective requires that Karen women not be seen as passive recipients of abuse. Rather, these women are actively resisting the militarisation of their homelands and the abuses committed against them. By implementing their own strategies to avoid and mitigate abuse, Karen women are fighting to keep their dignity despite the systematic military oppression under which they live. These responses are in turn serving to challenge and change traditional gender roles within Karen society. By recognising the agency of these women, their voices may find receptive ears willing to support the strategies they already employ in resisting maltreatment and exploitation. The aim of this report is therefore not solely to increase awareness of the abuse of women in Karen areas but, more importantly, to call attention to their right to speak for themselves and determine how best to respond to such abuse.

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# **I. Introduction and Executive Summary**

With increased media coverage and international attention on the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)'s militarisation of Karen State, there is a risk that those suffering under the regime's daily abuses will come to be seen solely in the light of their vulnerability. Such perspectives suggest any amelioration of the situation for local peoples can only arise from sources external to themselves. Outside actors are therefore the ones who must decide what responses are most appropriate. In this way rural villagers, who form the vast majority of the Karen population, are denied a voice in any relevant decision-making process, thereby perpetuating the denial of their rights. Such approaches are particularly problematic when attempting to understand the situation of abuse faced by women in Karen society. External representations of these individuals tend towards the stereotype of 'women in armed conflict' which depicts them as the superlative victims, lacking both the knowledge and means to address their own needs. Such portrayals reject the fact that victims of abuse are also agents of change. While they are constrained by military abuse, Karen women have also been actively working to mitigate the harmful effects of militarisation and thereby maintain their dignity in the face of systematic oppression. Their responses go well beyond 'coping strategies' by including evasion, deliberate non-compliance and other elements of resistance used to retain control over their own lives. Through these actions, these women have reshaped their roles and relations within society and influenced the prevailing balance of power.

Until now, many of the human rights reports concerning women have focused narrowly on rape and sexual abuse; while these are relevant, this report will attempt to broaden the issue to look at how women are affected by a much wider spectrum of human rights abuses, how these act in combination to change their lives, and how they respond and resist. This is more consistent with villagers' own articulation of their stories, in which specific incidents tend to be less important than how different factors – for example forced labour, movement restrictions, rape, and theft of livestock – combine in their lives to create hardship, undermine communities, and force people into displacement, wilful noncompliance, and other responses aimed at reclaiming their rights.

Regular military abuses, their effects on villagers and the manner in which these villagers respond are all influenced by local understandings of gender, as a social and cultural construction of roles shaping the relations between men and women. Any understanding of the situation of Karen women living under systematic military oppression would be incomplete without an awareness of the traditional perceptions of, and expectations on, women and men. In this context, women's roles have traditionally carried much respect within the community. Divisions of labour, although not always rigid, have led

them to take most of the responsibility for intra-household work such as child-rearing, processing and preparing food, weaving, tending the household garden, raising small livestock and managing the family's finances. Beyond the household, they do most of the foraging for forest products, and spend a great deal of time working in the fields alongside male family members, particularly at labour intensive times in the crop cycle. Whether in the home or in farm fields, women's work has not traditionally required them to travel far beyond their native villages. Similarly, marriages typically occur between those from the same or adjacent villages. They thus retain a strong connection to the land of their birth. While women have always occupied informal leadership roles with the household, formal leadership positions, such as that of village head, have traditionally been occupied by men.

Within this framework of traditional gender roles, certain military abuses such as rape and sexual violence, detention and ransoming of women on accusations of being wives or daughters of 'rebels', and forced organisation into military-controlled women's associations, have specifically targeted women. Meanwhile, men have been specifically targeted for heavy forced labour such as portering, and for random torture on false accusations as 'insurgents' for purposes of extortion. To escape such abuses many men leave their villages when SPDC forces are around, leaving women to protect the children, the elderly and the household belongings and to confront the soldiers entering their villages. Women then face an even greater risk of being taken for forced labour in lieu of men, or accused that their missing husbands and sons are 'insurgents' and being detained and tortured as a means of pressuring their missing men to 'surrender'.

For the majority of abuses however, soldiers have not particularly selected out either women or men to be recipients of abuse. For example, attacks on villages leading to displacement, killing on sight of those in hiding, most forms of forced labour, restrictions on health care and education, and various forms of deprivation of livelihood such as extortion, looting, land confiscation and destruction of property have targeted women and men indiscriminately. The difference in gender roles, however, has caused these abuses to affect women and men differently. Deprivation of livelihood has undermined women's ability to continue caring for children and managing the family's welfare within the household, and has forced women to take on greater roles in family income generation and staple crop production to supplement the shortfall created by military looting, extortion and forced labour. Food shortages and difficulties accessing medicine and medical treatment brought on by SPDC blockades on trade and travel have also challenged women's role of caregiver for their family. As men are already engaged primarily in subsistence agriculture, it is women who have been most burdened by the additional workload needed to support their families where military abuses have undermined their family's livelihood. Some of this involves extremely risky labour, such as increased

foraging for forest foods in areas densely polluted with landmines. Demands on women's labour are even more severe where male family members have been killed or are absent due to flight or involvement in the armed opposition. These situations require women to compensate for the lost labour of an absent husband or father. Overall, the prevailing human rights situation has at least doubled the workload of most women, while also forcing them into greater mobility and forms of work which are physically dangerous. This takes a toll on women both directly, as when women are raped, shot, or maimed by landmines, and indirectly, as the increased workload and worsening living conditions combine to erode women's health and deprive girls of education.

While gender roles have shaped the character of military abuse and its effects on villagers, the fluidity of such roles means that individuals can play an active part in redefining them. Women in Karen society have responded to abuse in ways which have challenged traditional gender roles. As there is a perception that men are more harshly treated by soldiers, women have increasingly taken on the position of village head, in which they serve as intermediaries between the village and military. In this role they have successfully exploited traditional norms of respect for women in order to negotiate reduced military demands on their communities. As military extortion and restrictions have severely hindered the provision of education and medical care at the village level, women have increasingly taken on roles as teachers, medics and midwives, both as means to support their own families and as a service to their communities. Given the vagaries of life for those who attempt to persevere under the SPDC's economic restrictions, blockades of trade routes, destruction of crops and food stores, extortion and systematic exploitation, women have broadened the family's subsistence base by adding cash crops that can be grown in hidden forest clearings, or by getting involved in small-scale trading. They have also developed new forms of inter-community mutual support. Covert 'jungle markets', for example, allow women living in hiding and those in military-controlled communities to exchange goods and thereby evade SPDC restrictions on trade. In their roles as caregivers in the family, women fleeing attacks on their homes have had the primary responsibility to manage their family's flight and relocation into the forest. They have coordinated the rapid packing and evacuation of the family's food, belongings and children, constructed temporary shelters, foraged for food, organised education for the children in displaced communities and worked as midwives, medics and teachers in these situations as well. As economic opportunities for villagers have collapsed under severe SPDC restrictions on movement, trade and agriculture, some women (particularly unmarried women) have chosen to migrate outside of their immediate communities to towns or across international borders in search of employment to support their immediate and extended families. Through their employment of various response strategies, Karen women have proven themselves to be adaptable and highly competent in confronting the challenges of life under military abuse and countering military

efforts to control and abuse them. In the process they have transcended many traditional restrictions on women and thereby altered local understandings of appropriate gender roles.

While these local responses to abuse are the most relevant factors in determining how to support Karen women, numerous international legal conventions, resolutions and declarations are nonetheless relevant to the discussion. For example, the 1930 forced labour convention (Convention 29) of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), to which Burma is a State Party, explicitly prohibits the employment of women in forced labour. The 1997 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires States Parties, which include Burma, to eradicate government policies that hinder the development and advancement of women, and includes explicit reference to the particular role of rural women in non-monetised sections of the economy. United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions 1325 and 1674 call on all states to prevent sexual and other violence against women in situations of armed conflict. The 1974 UN General Assembly Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict provides yet another affirmation of the rights of women in situations of armed conflict. While the SPDC regularly violates the requirements of these conventions, resolutions and declaration, the legal framework nevertheless ensures that the struggle of Karen women for dignity in the face of systematic military oppression is backed by international recognition of their right to resist abuse.

What becomes evident through this examination of the abuse and agency of Karen women is that these individuals are not the passive recipients of abuse that they are so often made out to be. Rather, by responding to abuse and working to claim their rights, these women are making political statements about society and the way in which it should change. This active engagement with the structures of power is missed when they are portrayed as helpless victims whose situation is solely determined by factors external to themselves, such as the abuses of military forces or the provision of international aid. The full achievement of their rights therefore requires that their agency be recognised and their voices included in any relevant decision-making process.

## Notes on the Text

This report is based on the firsthand testimony of Karen women and other villagers, including those still living in their villages, displaced villagers, and refugees and migrant workers in Thailand. To reflect a broader range of experiences we have drawn on KHRG interviews conducted over the entire period of our work since 1992, though prioritising the most recent interviews. The nature of abuses and responses has remained consistent in many ways during that time, so some quotes from the 1990s have been used if they are still as valid today as at the time they were given. Numerous SPDC and DKBA order documents have also been included throughout the body of the report. In such cases the abbreviation Sd. denotes the signature of the officer issuing the demand.

Many of the place names mentioned in the report are indicated on the accompanying maps. Most townships, villages and rivers have both a Karen and a Burmese name, and we have tried to be consistent throughout the report and favour the names preferred by local people. While districts are identified using Burmese names, their boundaries follow Karen designations as used by local people and the Karen National Union (KNU) but not by the SPDC. Under SPDC designations, sections of western Toungoo and Nyaunglebin districts fall in Pegu (Bago) Division, while western Thaton and Doooplaya Districts form part of Mon State. Karen and Burmese names and terms transliterated into English follow KHRG standards and may deviate from those used by other organisations as no convention has been universally adopted. Please note that KHRG revised our transliteration rules in October 2006 to make them more consistent and accurate, causing the spellings of many place names to change in our reports.

## Terms and Abbreviations

<b>BPHWT</b>	Backpack Health Worker Teams, an independent Karen relief group providing medical assistance in Karen areas
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>DKBA</b>	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, Karen group working with SPDC
<b>FBR</b>	Free Burma Rangers, an independent Karen relief organisation providing medical assistance in Karen areas
<b>IB</b>	Infantry Battalion (SPDC), supposed to be about 500 soldiers strong but at present most SPDC battalions number under 200
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>KED</b>	Karen Education Department, affiliated with the KNU
<b>KNLA</b>	Karen National Liberation Army, army of the KNU
<b>KNU</b>	Karen National Union, main Karen opposition group
<b>KWO</b>	Karen Women's Organisation, a Karen community-based organisation
<b>LIB</b>	Light Infantry Battalion (SPDC), supposed to be about 500 soldiers strong but at present most SPDC battalions number under 200
<b>NCO</b>	Non-commissioned officer (Corporal, Lance Corporal, Sergeant)
<b>SLORC</b>	State Law and Order Restoration Council, pre-1997 appellation of Burma's military junta
<b>SPDC</b>	State Peace and Development Council, current military junta ruling Burma
<b>TBA</b>	Traditional Birth Assistant
<b>TPDC</b>	Township Peace and Development Council
<b>UNAIDS</b>	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's' Emergency Fund
<b>VPDC</b>	Village Peace and Development Council
<b>big tin</b>	Unit of volume measure equivalent to 12.5 kg / 27.6 lb of milled rice
<b>kyat</b>	Burmese currency; US\$1 equals 6 kyat at official rate, +/- 1370 kyat at current market rate
<b><i>loh ah pay</i></b>	Forced labour; traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, but not military or state projects
<b><i>pyi</i></b>	Unit of volume measure; one <i>pyi</i> equals 1.56 kg / 3.45 lb or 8 standard milk tins
<b><i>set tha</i></b>	A Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger at army camps but also involving other tasks when no messages are in need of delivery
<b><i>viss</i></b>	Unit of weight measure; one <i>viss</i> equals 1.6 kg / 3.5 lb

# Karen Districts



©Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005

Scale: 1 cm to 22 km  
1 in. to 35 miles

# Burma



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Scale: 1 to 800,000

## II. Background

With Burma's independence from Britain in 1948, the country was left with a new regime lacking widespread popular legitimacy outside the ethnic Burman majority and attempting to extend control over a state that had little ethnic homogeneity. The central authority, dominated by the majority Burman ethnic group, fell back on military structures born out of the independence movement to address ideological and ethnic resistance to the new government. This in turn led to the military's seizure of power from 1958-1960 and again in 1962. Military rule and the process of regime consolidation through military expansion have continued ever since in various manifestations from the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the present State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Despite changes in name, these regimes have all sought to counter aspirations for ethnic autonomy with military force.

In the Karen territory of eastern Burma, ethnic resistance organisations began taking up arms as a means of countering the post-independence regime's campaign of domination and assimilation. Karen armed resistance began in 1949 and gradually consolidated into the present-day Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The KNU-led resistance movement sought full independence until the early 1990s, when it revised its objective to autonomy within a democratic federal state. In 1994, local concerns over lack of responsiveness from a leadership dominated by the Christian minority, exacerbated by SLORC efforts to divide the Karen resistance, led to a split within the KNLA. A large number of former KNLA soldiers, adopting the name Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), formed with SLORC/SPDC support and has since served as a proxy in the junta's campaign to extend military control over all areas of Karen State. The KNLA regrouped into a smaller guerrilla force and abandoned its policy of firmly controlling large areas of territory. Since then, the KNU/KNLA still exert *de facto* control over some areas, but when the SPDC sends military columns into these areas the KNU/KNLA and the villagers move out of the way, and then return when the SPDC troops withdraw.

Since the early 1970s the military authorities have pursued the goal of establishing complete control over the people and resources of eastern Burma through a strategy called the 'Four Cuts' under which they target civilians living in areas outside of their control and whom the military alleges support opposition forces. In this way the army has sought to eliminate sources of food, finances, recruits and intelligence for the armed resistance. To that end, the SPDC has attempted to transfer all civilians living in contested areas to villages and relocation sites under direct military control. These civilians are then used to support military expansion through the extortion of labour, food, materials and

money. In line with this approach, the SPDC has, in certain areas, defined villages as being either *ywa bone* ('hiding villages') or *nyeин chan yay* ('peace villages'). Villages that accommodate military demands and live under SPDC control are labelled as *nyeин chan yay*, while those that resist SPDC control by fleeing into the forest and avoiding military patrols are labelled as *ywa bone*. This latter group are considered enemies by the SPDC and targeted for military attacks.

A major challenge to the Four Cuts strategy has been the mountainous geography of Karen territory which the SPDC and its predecessors have never been able to fully control. Villagers and armed opposition groups have been able to exploit their traditional homeland to evade SPDC forces and retain some measure of control over their lives and territory. The Four Cuts strategy has thus evolved into annual offensives that aim to eliminate the presence of villagers from the hills by attacking villages, burning food supplies, and forcibly relocating all those found in these areas to military-controlled villages and relocation sites in the plains, next to military bases and along roadways. Rather than targeting the KNLA or other armed opposition groups, the SPDC directs these campaigns against villagers who lack the means of armed resistance and are more easily exploited. Since 1997, these campaigns have progressively become less targeted at the KNLA and more targeted directly at the villagers; at present, the SPDC appears to view the villagers much more as the enemy than the KNU/KNLA, negotiating with the latter while trying to eradicate the hill villagers without any attempt to contact or negotiate with them. In the northern areas worst hit by these clearance campaigns the KNLA has in turn evolved into something of a security force to protect villagers by harassing SPDC columns, providing armed escorts and removing landmines.

Through the further militarisation of Karen territory, the SPDC has been able to take greater control of large swathes of land and the villagers living therein. Civilians living in villages under military control are subject to constant demands for labour, money, food, and supplies. In SPDC-controlled relocation sites, villagers face even more severe restrictions and demands while having little or no access to agricultural land. These sites are therefore unsustainable and villagers often attempt to return to their former villages to tend to crops and livestock. Given such pervasive constraints and abuses, villagers are averse to living in areas under military control. Choosing instead to flee into the forest, *ywa bone* villagers face greater risks to health and food security and the SPDC treats them as legitimate targets of military aggression, systematically destroying their crops and food supplies, shooting them on sight and laying landmines along forest paths, river banks and abandoned villages where they are likely to travel. Whether living in SPDC-controlled villages or relocation sites, or hiding in the forest, villagers regularly confront military abuses that threaten their security of person and livelihood. Individual incidents

of abuse are not isolated events, but rather elements of a widespread and systematic military policy directly targeting villagers and serving to support the structures of military control.



A displaced woman from Toungoo District stands loaded with her personal belongings after fleeing from SPDC attacks on her village in April 2006. *[Photo: KHRG]*

### III. Women in Traditional Karen Society

#### Respect for elders

Karen communities in eastern Burma are overwhelmingly rural and agrarian. Children grow up within families that emphasise respect for relatives, the wider community, Karen culture and local traditions. As a consequence, villagers maintain a strong attachment to the social and work patterns of their ancestors. Beginning from childhood, women in Karen society are inculcated with maternal precepts and thus tend towards the role of caregivers within their immediate family. All children are taught to honour and respect their parents. This respect is expressed when younger people address adults unrelated to them. Traditional appellations for older women, even where no familial bond exists, include *mu ghah* (aunt) and *pee* (grandmother). Thus, older women always have a measure of maternal authority, especially when speaking to those younger than themselves. To be disrespectful to an elder woman would be something of a slight against one's own mother.

*"Both men and women are respected. When the father talks or mother talks, they [the children] respect it. I don't know what other people think, but as for me I obey my father and my mother."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

*"For my family, we obey and respect our parents. We respect our grandmother and [grand] father. Traditionally, people respect old people."*

- Naw S— (F, 22), N— village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

#### Divisions of labour

*"In the village we work together and help each other but I have children now. I cannot help other people and I do my work at home, cooking, carrying water, and weaving. It is useful for us to divide our work because my husband goes to the hill field and I stay at home and do work at home. I haven't studied anything. If my husband stays at home we take care of our children together and if he goes away [to the field or for other work] I have to look after my children. If my children get sick and their father is at home we take care of our children together. But if my husband is not at home, I must take care of my children alone."*

- Naw L— (F, 27), K— village, Nyaunglebin District (July 2006)

In most cases, both boys and girls contribute to the family by helping their parents in both the household and the field. As a consequence of such

involvement in the family's workload as children, Karen women develop the capacity to engage in all aspects of village work, including heavy labour such as ploughing fields. Divisions of labour are thus not strictly enforced, with both men and women capable of participating in field or household work. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for families to identify men as the 'head of the household' primarily responsible for heavy field labour such as clearing and burning off fields, hunting, rearing large livestock such as cattle, and trading. Women, on the other hand, are expected to administer household welfare by managing the family's finances and making decisions regarding how the children are raised. They also take responsibility for tasks within the home such as cooking, weaving, child rearing and occasionally raising small livestock, such as chickens and pigs. If a family opens a small village shop, the women usually do most of the work in this. As time permits, however, women also contribute to fieldwork alongside male members of their family. Particularly at important times in the crop cycle like sowing, weeding and the harvest, the whole village spends their days in the fields and women can be seen doing heavy work all day, often with a small child on their backs. These distinctions are not uniform across Karen society and particular proportions of labour divisions differ between individual households.



A young girl from P— village in eastern Papun District sifts rice in preparation for cooking.  
[Photo: KHRG]

*“There is no special career for women and mostly they are dependent on the head of the household and work together with him. There is also no difference in labour between men and women. They work together in fields and gardens if the women don’t have any toddlers. Some of the household heads like to have their wives and children go with them to work. Sometimes, they breed pigs and chickens to get extra money for the household and this is mostly done by the women. On the other hand, most of the men breed cows and grow cash crops to get extra money but some women also raise cows if their children are away and their fathers work in the field.”*

- Naw M— (F, 47), T— village, Dooplaya District (May 2006)

*“When my husband was alive, I worked at home raising poultry and taking care of my children and my husband went to work outside to get money and do the heavy work. He would give me all the money honestly. I took the money from him and had to manage [the finances] for the needs of the household.”*

- Naw T— (F, 64), K— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)



An internally displaced woman from Than Daung township, Toungoo District threshes newly harvested paddy. [Photo: KHRG]

*“When my father was alive and living with us he divided the work [between male and female] but later my mother did not. He wanted us to know that the work of women belonged in the house so that one day when we [his daughters] got married people would not gossip about us. He taught us since we were young that women should stay in the home.*

*As I am a woman, when I [was old enough to] know for myself that I could start doing work, my father asked me to clean the house because my father liked cleanliness and all the pots and spoons had to be cleaned. Every time when my father came back home from his work, water had to be ready for him to wash his feet. He was so strict that when he arrived back home after we had cleaned his house and [he] entered the house, if he felt that there was dust on the floor, then he told us to clean the house [again]... When my father went to his work my younger brother had to go with him and if my father carried one big tin [of rice], my father asked him to carry one small tin [as much] as he could. My father taught him about what men should do and how [he] would do well to stand up on his own feet so if he got married he could support his family."*

- Naw H— (F, 22), H— village, Dooplaya District (Aug 2006)

## **Women in positions of authority**

Following the identification of men as the 'head of the household', villagers have likewise traditionally ascribed leadership positions within the community to men. Nevertheless, women are active in community life and village welfare as well as in the preservation and propagation of their culture, religion, and traditions. One example of this is the position of women with households following certain forms of animism. Women in such cases are focal points for the spiritual power within the family and have monopolies over particular religious duties. Women in Christian families often participate and take leading roles in local religious and church support groups, though they do not become pastors. In Buddhist communities, women are responsible for preparing the temple offerings and the daily alms for monks.

*"For animist [households] the woman is the leader. For example, if my daughter married, the man who married my daughter must join with my daughter and my daughter must be the head of animism [within the household]. She has to take responsibility as her mother does. All daughters must take responsibility as their mothers do and cannot follow their husband. It is no problem for the men because if they are married, they must follow the women. The daughters must follow this duty like their mothers because if they do this, then the spirit of animism will bind [the family and the spirit together] well. Because if I offer to the spirit, after I finish worshipping, my eldest daughter must follow me and do as I did and after that her younger sister will follow her so it [the spirit] will bind [with us] well. Now I am the spiritual head in my house but after I worship my eldest daughter who is married must worship and after that my young daughters who are married must worship family by family. We must show them how to do this and maintain this, but a*

*single [unmarried] person could not do this. Animist people must eat food [together at ceremonies] two times per year. The first time is at the beginning of the year and the second time is at the end of the year. We must eat one time at the beginning of the year before it rains and another time when the harvest is finished. My husband doesn't have to do anything and I must do it."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), animist, M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)



A Christian Karen woman from Pa'an District, now living in a refugee camp across the border in neighbouring Thailand, leads her community in a group prayer. [Photo: KHRG]

*"In my village, apart from my daily work, I participated with a religious group and I was the head of the women's spiritual group."*

- Naw P— (F, 30), Christian, T— village, Toungoo District (March, 2006)

*"In Karen tradition when we have a special occasion we help each other at the time of the festival. We have a group of women and a group of men working together but we share the work for women and men. Women do the light work and men do heavy work. Women serve the food for the monks and other people and the men have to cook and carry water and look for fire wood. When they prepare bread, women pound rice to make powder. They do that together."*

- Naw T— (F, 64), Buddhist, K— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

In certain roles within Karen society, however, there has historically been a preponderance of men. Despite the infrequency of formal education and institutionalised medical care in traditional Karen society, occupations such as teachers and medics, where formalised, were solely male vocations. Although, as will be discussed below, this has now greatly changed. In the past, traditional restrictions of propriety meant that women rarely, if ever, took on these roles. Particular leadership roles in religion as well, such as those of Christian pastors and reverends and Buddhist monks, have also been limited to men.

*"I don't want my daughters to be teachers. It is the best if they help me with work [in the household]. If they die while working because they help me, it will be so good and if they die because they help me with work they will get an honourable name. If my daughter wants to be a nurse also, I won't let her be a nurse. I will ask her to help in my work."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

*"We have a clinic here. We get some good medical treatment from there too... Most of the medics are male. There is only one female medic."*

- Naw P— (F, 25), K— village, Nyaunglebin District (July 2006)

*"A male friend of mine told me, 'You are female. Even if you finish medical training you cannot help your people with this little bit of education. If you get married, you will stay at home and you will not be able to use [this education]. You can never become a doctor to help your people.'"*

- Naw H— (F, 37), former medic, Pa'an District, (Sep 2006)

## **Women's education**

*"Traditionally, women know that if you are educated, you will get married and you have to take on your role with the housework, then you don't need a lot of education, even if you can read or write, because your responsibility is only to look after the house. So, you do not need as high education as men. Men have to go out of the village, out of the country to work for income and to do trading. So they need more education because they have to go far away."*

- Naw Zipporrah Sein, secretary, KWO (Sep 2006)

While informal education has always been held in high regard amongst the Karen, formal education is also becoming increasingly valued for both men and women. However, traditionally, as men's roles have involved trade between villages and the greater possibility of travel, there was a perception that formal

education, where available, was more important in their lives. For women, focusing as they did on intra-household activities, education was considered a less important commodity. Again, however, these attitudes are not and were not consistently rigid across Karen society and in many households women's education was equally valued.

*"When I was in school my brother and I were at the same [school] but [later] people [her parents] sent my brother to higher schools. At first he went to Kya In, later he studied in Pa Thein and after that he went to study in P'Lu. I don't know why, but my mother sent him [to study at these schools]. I think if I had been smarter my mother might have sent me to [those] schools."*

- Naw P— (F, 40), H— village, Dooplaya District (Aug 2006)

*"I don't think that education is important. I really think that it is not important because I have seen that my nephew has finished tenth standard [high school] but he cannot use this and now he has gone back to help his parents in the flat field. Now I have sent my daughter to school and I told her that I will keep her in school only until the fifth standard. It is enough for me if she can read and write the names of people."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

*"I have six siblings - three female and three male. My parents sent all of us to go to school but none of us finished school. When we saw that my parents were too poor to send us to school we did not study and we helped them [with their field and household work]. They didn't distinguish between daughters and sons and they [initially] kept us in Pa Thein School. "*

- Naw P— (F, 40), H— village, Dooplaya District (Aug 2006)

*"Some parents say that if they have to keep their children in school at another place, they will send their son first. But my parents kept two of their daughters in school but didn't keep their son in school. Some people say that women don't have many chances, so they prefer to keep their sons in school rather than [their] daughters."*

- Naw P— (F, 23), H— village, Papun District (Sep 2006)

## **Women in the community**

*"They [women] also have the role to look after the community. So, when something happens to another family the women are responsible to have a network to support those who are in need. So, there's a connection of the women to work together at that part."*

- Naw Zipporrah Sein, secretary, KWO (Sep 2006)

In traditional Karen communities, the people elect a village head who supervises the welfare of the group. The responsibilities of the position primarily involve informing the community of common concerns and organising the labour needed in response.<sup>1</sup> As such, villagers rely heavily on the village head's management abilities. As men have traditionally been regarded as the heads of the household their domestic authority has been reflected in the village structure. The seat of village head has therefore historically been occupied predominantly by men.

Karen villagers have also traditionally engaged in cooperative agricultural work for the mutual benefit of the community. At harvest time, villagers would gather together to work in the fields of one household at a time. For this work, women would assemble in a group of around 30 individuals and conduct their work jointly. There was no need to pay for this service, as the turn of each household would eventually arise. The tight social bonds developed in such mutual assistance have contributed to villagers' success in mitigating and managing the vagaries of village life. Households suffering from a poor harvest would be able to count on fellow villagers to contribute to their welfare, even if only temporarily.

*"In our village, we had a group of 30 single women with one person responsible for organising [the group] and a group of 30 single men with one person responsible for organising. When we went to the paddy field for the harvest we went together with all women and men. The situation in that time was good for us."*

- Pee H— (F, 75), D— village, Papun District, (Sep 2005)

*"Now in our village people start helping each other again in the fields. Both single women and single men and old women and old men go to help the paddy field owner by cutting and clearing grass and also for the harvest. When we go to work in the hill field or the flat field the rice paddy field owner cooks for us."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

*"Sometimes, if the food [harvest] was inadequate for the whole year, we bought some if we had money. If we didn't have any money, we would borrow some from others. The people there [in her village] used to help each other in such ways."*

- Naw P— (F, 30), T— village, Toungoo District (March 2006)

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<sup>1</sup> Such communal labour must be clearly distinguished from contemporary SPDC usage of the term "loh ah pay". "Loh ah pay" is a Pali term traditionally used in reference to short-term voluntary labour on temple or village projects. The SPDC has misappropriated the term for use in reference to all forms of short-term forced labour demanded from villagers.



Young girls in Pa'an District gather together to offer food to local Buddhist monks.  
[Photo: KHRG]

Other cooperative ventures involving women include organising and preparing for particular cultural and religious festivals. These include, for example, funerals which according to animist tradition can last up to three months. In these situations, the women gather together and the men gather separately and the groups share music and poetry.

*"On special occasions both women and men go to work together. Women would slice onions and peel potatoes and cook in the monastery for the monks and they would cook in a small pot. But the men cooked rice and curry on the ground for everyone because they used big pans for the curry and for the rice. We would share this kind of work. In the past we had to carry water and both women and men would carry a lot of water. Now we use a generator [with a pump] for water so we don't have to go to carry water. In the past we used to do ceremonies especially on the full moon, dark moon, and half moon days and we were so happy to work together, both women and men in the whole village with the monks."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

*"In case of a funeral, both women and men went together and we composed poetry and sang."*

-Pee H— (F, 75), D— village, Papun District, (Sep 2005)

## Courtship and marriage

Notwithstanding disparities in courtship practices across Karen society, much of the social interaction that leads to marriage traditionally occurs at community festivals and ceremonies such as funerals and harvest celebrations. In these contexts, men and women may gather and recite poetry which they have written for this purpose. If they feel inclined towards marriage, the interested boy must visit the girl's family accompanied by one or more respected village elders. At such meetings, if the girl's parents agree, both parties can negotiate marriage plans. A pig, raised by prospective brides for this purpose, is slaughtered for the marriage ceremony. This occasion provides yet another opportunity for villagers to strengthen communal bonds and for young people to meet.

### ***Traditionally when two people fall in love...***

"I must let my daughter know about her marriage. Because a man came to me with the other elders and asked me for the love of my daughter and I had to let my daughter know about this. If I have a [benevolent] spirit I must tell him [the spirit] to forgive her [the daughter's] mistakes and give him an offering of acacia fruit and turmeric also with red and white sandalwood. After that I set a date and time for the wedding and my daughter gets married when that date arrives. But before the man came to ask for my daughter they had already talked with each other and when they [knew that they] loved each other then the elders came to ask for her from me.

"For the wedding the woman raises pigs but the man must also find pigs for the wedding. The man and woman make offerings together. If the woman has raised a pig, the man must buy a pig as well. The woman offers food and the man has to prepare and buy things for the house. Previously, women used to raise pigs for the wedding and the pigs were very big because some of them raised the pigs for about five years. So the pigs were so big. When the man loves the woman he tells the elders and the elders go with him to meet with the woman's parents to ask permission to marry the daughter. If the daughter loves him or does not love him, the daughter can say something about [whether she] loves or does not love [him]...

"Normally men ask for love from women and women ask for love from men also. But if a woman asks for love from a man, many people will gossip about her a lot because she wants the man first but the man doesn't want her. Traditionally when two people fall in love the man and the elders go to the woman's house and ask permission from the parents. But now some young people fall in love and when they are living together the village elders marry them but do not marry them nicely [in a dignified way] with red scarves and with Karen women's marriage clothes and [white] sarong and Karen men's clothes and red sarong. If they fall in love and tell the parents, the elders make arrangements for them and marry them nicely and many people help with the wedding in different ways. Some provide pigs or chickens and some provide alcohol or rice. People in the village help each other for the wedding."

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

Nuanced differences across regions and religions mean that particular courtship and marriage practices such as those described above will vary. Nevertheless, the importance of parental sanction and blessing as well as the involvement of the community in marriage ceremonies are consistent despite regional and religious peculiarities. Deviations from the norm, as referred to at the end of the boxed quote above, are frowned upon and forced marriages without the ceremony and dignity of a traditional marriage may ensue.

## The importance of land

As everyday life is centred on the village, local communities serve as an important source of identity. Villagers are thus typically averse to leaving them and marriages more often than not occur between people from the same, or neighbouring, villages. This sense of belonging is also manifest in a strong attachment to one's land, not only as the heritage of one's ancestors but also as a means of livelihood. Individuals in rural Karen society therefore tend, where possible, to remain close to the village of their birth with the hope of passing on their land to their children. As expensive possessions and large financial savings are infrequent, issues of wealth are inextricably linked to land and the potential yield of agricultural fields or orchards. While villagers rarely have formal documentation of land ownership, property rights follow customary law and are reaffirmed within the community annually, in order to avoid conflicts over boundaries. Traditional Karen sovereignty resides at the village level, and villagers therefore see land rights as something to be determined and resolved locally rather than distributed or verified by some distant and foreign higher power.

*"Land is important for us to earn our livelihood. If we don't have it [land], we are faced with trouble because we cannot earn a livelihood. Now the villagers don't live in the village [they are displaced]. It [living away from her village and land] makes trouble for me because I think about my parents. How are they going to get food and to earn their livelihood?"*

- Naw T— (F, 28) T— village, Papun District (Sep 2006)

*"Land is important but I don't have [much] land. I have [only] a narrow [section of] land that I cannot give to my children."*

- Naw T— (F, 64) K— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

Moreover, while men's traditional work would see them travelling to neighbouring towns or villages to labour or trade, it has been seen as inappropriate for women to engage in work outside of their villages, and indeed occasionally outside of their households as well.

*“As for me I don’t dare to go to work at other villages far away from my village. Women should not go to work at places which are so far. In fact women have to stay in the house and work in the house. If [a woman] goes to work far away at another place or another country [and] if she comes back to the village then people will look at her and gossip about her and say bad things about her. People will say that the woman is not good at all. I don’t allow my daughter to go to work at another place. I worry that people will say bad things about her and she will be unable to maintain her good name. I feel that it is enough for me when she works in the house. I never want to go to work at another place. I only think that I will do my work in the plantation field here and this is sufficient for me if I get rice.”*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

These particular beliefs and behaviours outlined as part of traditional Karen society are not absolutely uniform. Differences between regions, religions, communities and households lead to nuanced particularities. Notwithstanding such diversity, the above passages do reflect general patterns of belief and behaviour which have served to shape gender roles within traditional Karen society. It is in these roles that Karen women are experiencing and responding to abuse. The particular abuses and their effects are thus conditioned by such contextual understandings of gender. At the same time these roles are adapting in response, as will be discussed later.

### III. Military Abuses and Their Effects on Women

In any areas where armed groups are active, soldiers and officers exploit civilians in order to support themselves and the military structures on which they depend. Owing to massive military expansion, since the late 1990s the SPDC has been operating under a policy whereby soldiers in Karen and other areas must 'live off the land', which almost invariably entails soldiers extorting and looting from the villagers. The widespread and systematic abuse of villagers is thus central to the maintenance of military control. The gender roles and identities present in both Karen and Burman society shape the manner in which such abuses are perpetrated and how they differently affect men and women. General abuses such as extortion or restrictions on movement, which are seemingly committed without any overt prioritisation of men or women, can have greatly differing results because of the roles that men and women are expected to fill in the family and society. Furthermore, the militarisation of Karen territory has served to propagate military/civilian and male/female power disparities that shape the patterns of abuse perpetrated against villagers.

One of the major factors leading to differences in the patterns of abuse between women and men is that SPDC and DKBA forces frequently treat male villagers as possible KNU/KNLA members, supporters or sympathisers and target them for physical abuse and extortion. The identification of men as more likely soldiers results in certain vulnerabilities particular to men. Also, gendered perceptions of work roles often attribute a greater significance to male over female involvement in subsistence. For both of these reasons, men frequently flee their villages when SPDC and DKBA forces approach in order to avoid conscription for forced labour or possible detention and torture upon allegations of involvement with the KNU/KNLA.

*"The men don't dare face the Burmese [SPDC soldiers] and try to escape from them if possible because they are afraid that the Burmese [soldiers] might force them [to do labour]. We are also afraid that they will force us to go on patrol with them and we don't dare go to do that. But we have to go to guide them as the men try to escape from them if they come in [to the village]. If they [the soldiers] stay many days [in the village] they [the men] come back. They don't arrest the men if the men come back but they demand one or two people to serve as guides for them."*

- Ma M—— (F, 19), A—— village, Dooplaya District (April 2002)

When male villagers are temporarily absent, women are placed in situations of heightened vulnerability and responsibility. While there is some perception that women will be less likely, or less intensively, abused this is not always the

case. By remaining to receive the brunt of abuse, women serve, in some respects, as the protectors of men who are thus able to evade military personnel. SPDC and DKBA troops often accuse women, where male family members are absent, of being the wives or daughters of KNU/KNLA members. They may be detained and tortured for the purpose of extracting information about the involvement and whereabouts of male family members. Many of these incidents function as opportunities for the soldiers to extort more money from the villagers. In some cases, women who stay behind while other villagers flee are simply shot dead or murdered and left stripped and mutilated as a warning to the village. Alternately, where the military units are there for the primary purpose of acquiring forced labour, women are taken in lieu of men. Whether or not a given abuse is specifically targeted at women, the effects of various abuses differ as a consequence of gender roles in the family and community.

## **Forced labour**

Forced labour is a systematic abuse in Karen State that serves to support the region's militarisation. The limited financial resources of the SPDC in proportion to the massive increase in conscriptions have led to a situation where military structures are unsustainable without the exploitation of the wider populace. As such, the widespread and systematic use of forced labour is a necessary component of military control over the region.

In Karen territory, where the SPDC lacks a consolidated hold on the population, forced labour is an abuse most frequently associated with those areas lying along car roads and near military bases that are more easily accessed and exploited. The SPDC has used the forced labour of people inhabiting these areas to support its expansion into, and consolidation of, those areas less effectively under military control. The displacement and forced relocation of villagers in these areas to villages and relocation sites under SPDC control provides the military with an accessible source of exploitable labour. The employment of forced labour is standard practice by the DKBA as well and the KNLA has also made use of villagers to serve as porters for military patrols.

<p><u><b>Stamp:</b></u>  Karen Buddhist Army  D.K.B.A</p>	
<p>Army Matter</p>	<p>Date: 15.[blank]</p>
<p>To:</p>	
<p>N— [Village]  Village Head</p>	
<p>Letting [you] know, when this letter is received arrange to send 30 people, female and male, to donate [their labour] building the road for 5 days. In accordance with this order, receive, obey and come.</p>	
<p>Come to arrive at Khoh Meh Si Kaw Hti on 18-3-2005.</p>	
<p>Battalion Commander  Pu Ka Saw Wah</p>	
<p>(Meh Si Pagoda Road Command)</p>	
<p>[Sd.] 15.3.2005</p>	

Forced labour covers an extensive array of tasks demanded of villagers. These include serving as guides, sentries, porters and *set tha* (messengers) as well as clearing brush from the sides of roads, working in agricultural projects and constructing building supplies, roads, military buildings and fences to enclose their own villages. For all of these duties, villagers are required to bring their own food and are fined if unable to work. In fact, the extortion of money from villagers unable to comply with forced labour demands is often the primary intent of issuing such orders in the first place. The actual conscription of forced labour is either demanded through the village head or, alternately, villagers are detained and taken from their homes and fields by the military forces themselves. For most tasks, soldiers prefer to acquire men as they are likely more physically able to perform heavy labour and there are fewer cultural taboos against threatening and abusing them.

*“When they [SPDC soldiers] arrived in Sho Ser they approached and encircled the houses and arrested the families in the houses. They released the women and took the men with them [for forced labour].”*

- Naw S— (F, 58), P—, Toungoo District (Dec 2005)

*“People who stay close to the camp must do sentry duty. When the load [of monthly military supplies] arrives ... Men do these kinds of [heavy] forced labour and women don’t have to do these kinds of forced*

*labour. But women and children have to go to cut and clear the [brush from the sides of the] roads.”*

- Naw P— (F, 40), H— village, Dooplaya District (Aug 2006)

*“For women, they don’t force them to do much hard labour. For women, SPDC [soldiers] order them to do ‘loh ah pay’ such as working on their plantation, constructing houses for them and other things that women are able to do.”*

- Naw H— (F, 36), K— village, Nyaunglebin District (July 2006)



Villagers from M— village, Dweh Loh township, Papun district use bamboo to raft hardwood logs down the Bilin river on January 25<sup>th</sup> 2005. They were ordered by the DKBA to cut the logs, haul them out of the forest with their elephants, and float them downriver so that DKBA officers can sell them for personal profit. The villagers receive nothing for this. Women pole the rafts downriver, and despite the dangers of the heavy logs rolling over, even pregnant women and those with babies strapped to their backs must go, as in this photo; Karen men are not willing to confront the DKBA for fear that they may be forcibly recruited. [Photo: KHRG]

Although the military prioritises men for forced labour, male villagers frequently flee as they believe they will likely face harassment and abuse from SPDC and DKBA troops, irrespective of whether or not soldiers have come to conscript forced labourers. The belief that men will be more harshly treated motivates villagers to arrange for women to serve on forced labour projects instead. Villagers therefore exploit traditional gender roles in an attempt to lessen the overall abuse that the community will face. In Thaton District, for example, army camps regularly demand large quantities of bamboo and roofing thatch

from villages. Men generally go out to cut and haul the bamboo while women gather leaves for the thatch; women then slice some of the bamboo and weave the leaves into thatch shingles. When the time comes to deliver the thatch or raft the bamboo downriver to the army camp, however, it is almost always the women who go alone because the men dare not enter the army camp.

<u>Stamp:</u>	To:
#548 Light Infantry Battalion	Chairperson / Head
Military Operations Command	<u>xxxx</u> village
Subject: <u>Come for loh ah pay</u>	
Regarding the above subject, male 5 people, female 5 people, total 10 people, must come from the Elder's village for loh ah pay without fail with mattocks [large hoes], machetes, and rations for one day on the 4 <sup>th</sup> waxing day to arrive at 1000 hours, you are informed.	
Place: <u>yyyy</u>	[Sd.]
Date: 30-9-2000	(for) Acting Battalion Commander #548 Light Infantry Battalion

*"Most of the forced labourers for the SPDC are females because males dare not go and work in their place... Sometimes, when the SPDC sees that only women have come to work for them, they ask why the men have not come. We then reply 'they dare not come because you harass them'."*

- Naw M— (F, 47), village secretary, T— village, Dooplaya District (May 2006)

The local perception that men's involvement in farming is more important to the family's subsistence than women's domestic work also motivates them to remain out in the field or forest when military personnel arrive. As a consequence, women often allow themselves to be taken to do forced labour. Such situations include the forced labour of pregnant women, girls as young as 12 years old and elderly women in their 50s, 60s or even 70s. However, for the most physically demanding tasks, men often remain in the village and allow the soldiers to take them away for forced labour, or the whole village flees to evade it.

*"Women usually go to cut and clear the [sides of the] road more often than men. Men have a lot of work to do so women go [for forced labour] instead. Some of them [the men] go to the hill field and some go to the flat field to get food for their livelihood. We [women] begin [working on the roads] in the morning and if we finish early then sometimes we can come back early at 9:00 a.m. and sometimes at 10:00 a.m.... They don't pay people who do that."*

- Naw M— (F, 32), village tract leader, H— village, Dooplaya District (March 2005)



Women from Bilin township, Thaton District doing forced labour cutting back the scrub from beside the Bilin – Papun vehicle road. Landmines are a constant threat in this work. [Photo: KHRG]

*“Females do more ‘loh ah pay’ than males, such as cutting and clearing roads or carrying thatch, bananas or coconuts. But males must still do the heavy work. We must do the work that they demand of us. We don’t dare to oppose them because we live near to them and we have no way to escape from them.... We must do ‘loh ah pay’ and pay them money when they demand [it from] us. Sometimes our children get sick and we have no money to buy medicine. But if SPDC or DKBA [soldiers] order us, we must find [what they want] and give it to them... Last time when I was nearing the end of my pregnancy I had to go cut and clear the side of the road for my husband because he was busy with his work.”*

- Naw M— (F, 35), K— village, Papun District (March 2006)

As a consequence of the military’s increased use of women on forced labour projects, women are more frequently engaging in heavy labour. This type of work includes portering of military food, ammunition and supplies as well as the construction of roadways.

*“I want to tell you about my problem. After my father died I had to go to carry the [SPDC soldiers’] loads instead of him. When I went to carry the load, nobody could take care of my young sibling. I am young and I had to go to carry the load so that is a big problem for me. My mother*

*stays at home because she is sick. Sometimes my young sibling is sick but I must go to carry the load. Then when I have to go to carry the load the SPDC military forces me to go at the front [of the patrol] on the way, which is dangerous [because of potential landmines and KNLA ambushes]. When I have to carry a load like that I worry about [dangers along] the way and for my mother because she sick. When I have to carry a load I am not happy and I cry. I cannot be happy on the way when I have to carry a load. I am angry and hate that I must go, but I must go. I am angry with them [SPDC soldiers] and hate them a lot... I had to carry a load for the SPDC military. It was on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2002. I had to carry rice. It weighed 10 viss [16 kg / 35 lb]. I had to carry that from Kler Lah to Naw Soe. It took three days. We had to take our own food. We didn't sleep well. Insects bit us. There were ten people. They were over 50 years old. The youngest people were twelve years old. Yes, a pregnant woman also had to carry a load."*

*- K— (F, 12), W— village, Nyaunglebin District (April 2002)*



Women in Papun District deliver thatch shingles to an LID #66 army camp following orders to do so from the camp commander. [Photo: KHRG]

*"On the 10<sup>th</sup> [of May 2002] we had to carry loads for them [SPDC soldiers]. We carried shells, books and medicine. We had to carry the loads to the top of the hill at Ka Lay Kee army camp. Everyone, women and men, were [in total] 42 people. There were more women than men, [there were] only four men... The youngest woman was about 18 years old. The oldest woman was 50 to 55 years old... We didn't*

*have rice to eat for two days and two nights. We were all wet. We had only clothes like shirts and sarongs on us with a hat and a machete when we went that time. We got wet but we had to stay like that for the whole day and the whole night. They didn't allow us to make a fire. They could torture us only like that. The men didn't dare to go and women had to go. They forced women to carry medicine, books, their boxes, shells and grenades – that's all. They forced me to carry 60 grenades so I think it might have been about 10 to 20 viss [16 - 32 kg / 35 – 70 lb]. They didn't let us take a rest. If we delayed and could not keep up with our friends, they got angry with us and we had to follow our friends and fell down many times and we didn't have fire or lamps with us. We had to travel in the darkness. They didn't kick us; they just argued and insulted. People were so tired because we could not eat rice for so many days and it was raining and [we] got wet. So some people have fever.”*

- Naw P— (F, 41), T— village, Dooplaya District (July 2002)

Another form of labour that soldiers are increasingly forcing women to engage in is the removal of landmines. Whether manually clearing scrub from areas suspected to be mine contaminated, 'sweeping' or walking on roads before the passage of military trucks, or acting as human minesweepers forced to walk in front of troop patrols in mine-affected areas, women are placed in situations of extreme danger of mine injury or death.

*“Sometimes their [SPDC soldiers'] trucks would come up [to the village], and when they were coming they forced married women to go to the car road to clear landmines so their trucks could come up. They took many women to the car road to clear landmines first and the trucks followed afterward, because if they didn't ask women to do that they were afraid that their trucks would hit landmines. They are fighting with KNU soldiers so they are afraid that KNU soldiers might have planted landmines on the road, so they keep the villagers as cover. The men are afraid of them so when the men see them they flee away and sometimes when they [the SPDC soldiers] see men they arrest men and torture men.”*

- Naw S— (F, 22), N— village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

A further effect of the increasing proportion of women engaged in forced labour for the military is a heightened risk of sexual abuse and rape. While such abuses may not stem from direct military orders, their likelihood increases with the isolation of individual women working under the supervision of soldiers accustomed to the military's culture of impunity. Rape, including gang rape, by military forces during forced labour projects is common enough to be a constant fear of women doing forced labour in Karen areas.

*"Mostly women have to cut and clear the camp, carry rations and carry loads of bamboo, logs and food for the military. Most of the military are men."*

- Pee M— (F, 59), H— village, Thaton District (Oct 2005)

*"In families that have no men, the women must do the portering. Yes, in my village they are safe but in the other villages women who go to porter face many problems. Because they are female they have sometimes been raped by SPDC soldiers."*

- Saw H— (M, 30), T— village, Nyaunglebin District (Nov 2005)

*"I arrived here [at Klay Muh Hta IDP camp near the Thailand border] two weeks ago. Last month when I had to go for slave labour, I was raped by a soldier. We went to work at their army camp for five days, and when we got there they refused to give us any food. Everyone had to work without food, so the next morning I had to go back to the village with my friends to get some food. After we brought it back to their camp, two men escaped from the slave labour at night, so the soldiers went to try to catch them and made things harder for the rest of us. That's why they wouldn't let us go back to the village after that. Altogether there were 19 of us - 11 men and 8 women. That night a soldier came, grabbed my shoulders, and pushed me down. Then he covered my mouth so I couldn't scream. Then he kissed me and raped me. I felt so terrible. The soldier said, 'Don't tell anyone about this.' But I said, 'I will tell because I feel so terrible about it.'"*

- Naw P— (F, 32), M— village, Pa'an District (June 1994)

Situations where husbands and fathers are absent or dead and where the military nevertheless orders women to work are especially problematic for mothers with young children. Without anyone remaining at home to watch over infants, women often attempt to bring their children along while they engage in forced labour. Soldiers, however, are not inclined to allow babies and young children to accompany their parents. As a result, these children and babies must occasionally be left at home alone.

*"When the Burmese [SPDC soldiers] arrested me, my youngest child was only two months old. They forced me to carry a load for them. It was on June 10<sup>th</sup> 2002. There were 40 people [who went to do forced labour] but at that time there were only four men who had to go along. They came and took me when I was in my house and it was seven o'clock in the morning. They told me to go to the meeting there. But when I arrived there, they didn't release me but forced me to carry the load. They didn't make any demands to the village head but they arrested all of us. At that time, they didn't see my husband as my husband had gone to his plantation. They didn't allow me to take my*

*children and they told me that it was just for a while. So I didn't take my children and left two of my children at home."*

- Ma Y— (F, 28) L— village, Dooplaya District (Oct 2002)

## Displacement



A displaced villager with her child rests at a hiding site after fleeing from SPDC forces operating around Thay Pa Der village in eastern Toungoo District in 2006. Villagers were only able to bring whatever supplies they could carry on their backs and many of the children displaced with this group became sick and malnourished. [Photo: KHRG]

While the SPDC in its rhetoric claims that annual military offensives against villages are part of a comprehensive 'anti-insurgency' campaign, they rarely if ever target armed opposition groups. Rather, the purpose of such attacks has been to force all villagers into military-controlled villages and relocation sites. However, life in such relocation areas involves daily violations of their rights. Those villagers living under direct SPDC control face constant demands for food, finances, labour and supplies which undermine their ability to support themselves and meet their own subsistence needs, yet if they cannot comply they face punishments including arrest, torture or fines. These relocation sites typically lack access to adequate agricultural land and pasture. Restrictions on movement imposed by local military leaders mean villagers are unable to maintain crops left behind when they were forced to relocate. The combined system of abuse pervasive in SPDC-controlled villages and relocation sites

prompts villagers to flee into forest hiding sites in order to avoid SPDC patrols seeking to capture and forcibly transfer them.

Naw K— is shown here making one of several trips needed to transport her whole family and some of their belongings across the flooded Thi Roh River in Papun district in August 2002. Two weeks earlier, SPDC soldiers from Light Infantry Division #44, Military Operations Command #2, LIB #9, had come to her village led by deputy battalion commander Myo Myint. They stayed in the village only a day, but threatened the villagers and told them, “After we leave, another unit will come.” The villagers didn’t wait to see, they left for the hills. Naw K— had to do everything herself because her husband was not at home. The women from her village said that several of them had done the same; families were divided in the hurry to leave the village. *[Photo: KHRG]*



The particular effects for women of displacement into the forest are many. Their communities and networks are broken up, undermining the social roles that they played in the village. Even where new communities form they are typically an agglomeration of people coming from diverse areas who may have nuanced cultural, linguistic and social differences. Furthermore, displaced villagers living in hiding are strained by severe food insecurity and obstacles to accessing medicine and medical care. As those fleeing military attacks on their villages are only able to take whatever supplies they can carry, food supplies at hiding sites are certain to be insufficient. While villagers frequently deposit covert rice stores in the forest to support their displacement should they need to flee their homes, such food supplies as well as their storage containers are systematically sought out and destroyed by SPDC soldiers. To compensate for insufficient food, mothers displaced to the forest often rely on watered-down rice porridge to feed children and prolong their limited food supplies. Poor nutrition combined with the generally unhygienic conditions of life in the forest means villagers confront regular illness and disease, which are discussed in detail in the section below on health.



Women and children from S— village in Than Daung township, Toungoo District, gather in the rudiments of one of the first shelters they built after having just fled into the forest to escape SPDC troops in June 2004. *[Photo: KHRG]*



A mother with a newborn infant from K— village in Tantabin township, Toungoo District takes a rest while fleeing into the forest with other villagers in January 2004. *[Photo: KHRG]*

*“When the military’s activities occurred the last time men were afraid that the Burmese soldiers would arrest them [in order to force them] to porter so they fled away and we were only women performing the ceremonies in the monastery and in the village, and [so] we didn’t perform any more ceremonies at that time.”*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

Aside from ever-present dangers to health, villagers who remain in hiding also risk encountering military patrols that would shoot them upon detection without asking questions. This is especially so for women engaged in foraging for food available in the forest who may need to travel far from hiding sites. These women also risk stepping on landmines frequently set up by SPDC forces with the primary intent of injuring displaced villagers. Traditional practices dependent on sedentary lifestyles are hampered by the continual need for vigilance and mobility. These and other factors lead to situations where traditional social relations and practices are lost or at least severely hampered. The roles of women in the household and in the community are in turn undermined. The many effects of displacement on women’s lives and roles will be discussed further below in the section ‘Women’s Responses to Abuses and Changing Roles’.

## **Forced organisation**

In areas of Karen State where the military has established more thorough control of the local population, SPDC officials have been forcibly recruiting villagers into nationwide military-controlled organisations. These organisations serve as yet another means to monitor local-level civilian activities, coordinate rapid mobilisation for self-congratulatory public ceremonies and political denunciation rallies, and obstruct independent action potentially subversive to military rule.

For women, the major SPDC-controlled organisations are the Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWAF) and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA). Both organisations were established by the junta and remain thoroughly subsumed within the military hierarchy. When former SPDC Prime Minister Lt. Gen Khin Nyunt established the MWAF in 2003, he stated that the organisation was intended to “take charge of the women sector comprehensively” and function in support of the SPDC’s Myanmar National Committee for Women’s Affairs (MNCWA).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Formation of MWAF”, *News and Views from Myanmar*, Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2003. Accessed at [www.mofa.gov.mm/news/dec29\\_mon6.html](http://www.mofa.gov.mm/news/dec29_mon6.html) on September 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

The SPDC established the MMCWA on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1990 through the implementation of law No. 21/90. As of 2006, the organisation boasted of having a total membership of 5.4 million people, or 10% of the total population of Burma.<sup>3</sup> Despite its overtly governmental origins and continued linkages, the MMCWA claims to be “a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the health and well-being of mothers and children.”<sup>4</sup> The organisation further claims that “recruitment is entirely on a voluntary basis and those who appreciate the Association’s belief, aim and mission to serve the people become members.”<sup>5</sup> Programmes of the MMCWA, according to official reports, have been conducted with support from UNICEF, UNDP and UNAIDS.<sup>6</sup> Despite claims of being independent and apolitical, both the MAAF and MMWCA remain bound to the structures of SPDC militarisation. For example, the position of township-level chair for the MMCWA is reserved for the wife of the local Township Peace and Development Council chairman. The position of village level MMWCA chair goes to the wife of the SPDC-appointed village headman and that of secretary, to the wife of the village secretary. Prior to his ouster as the SPDC’s Prime Minister and Intelligence Chief, Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt’s wife Dr Khin Win Shwe was the national leader of MMCWA. This position was subsequently filled by professor Daw Kyu Kyu Shwe, wife of Colonel Pe Thein, a long-time military bureaucrat formerly Minister of Health and Education before he became Minister of the Office of the Prime Minister in a cabinet shuffle that took place in 1994.

It may be that the SPDC believes organising the villagers in this manner will strengthen the military’s control of the population and hinder local level dissent. A further possibility, however, is that as these organisations, and MMCWA in particular, receive large amounts of funding from UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations, the SPDC may simply be trying to increase membership in order to claim greater legitimacy and attract more external funds for use in strengthening local mechanisms of control. As a consequence, and in contrast to the claim that these organisations are voluntary, all villages in areas under regular military control have been ordered to establish local

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<sup>3</sup> *Discussion from the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, Concerning the False News Reports from Internal and External Dissident Groups*, Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, June 2006. Accessed at <http://mission.itu.ch/MISSIONS/Myanmar/mofa1/mmcwa.htm> on September 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Initial Report of States Parties: Myanmar*, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, June 25<sup>th</sup> 1999. Accessed at [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm) on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *Discussion from the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, Concerning the False News Reports from Internal and External Dissident Groups*, MMCWA, June 2006. Accessed at <http://mission.itu.ch/MISSIONS/Myanmar/mofa1/mmcwa.htm> on September 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

MMCWA and MWAf chapters. The membership numbers demanded are in proportion to the size of the village. Villages are told they must 'buy' a specified number of application forms, every one of which must be completed and returned. Women are forced to formally apply for membership by filling out a written application for which they must pay between 250 and 350 kyat (for the MMCWA form) and between 300 and 500 kyat (for the MWAf form).

*"Women that join their groups have to pay admission fees. They ordered the village head to select women to join Myanmar Women's Affairs [Federation]. We already collected money from the villagers and sent it to them. Every person who joined had to pay 310 kyat. No villagers were interested in joining, so we had to force them to join. They gave 50 application forms to my village. Even though the villagers don't want to do the things they are forced or ordered to do, they have to do it because we are under SPDC control. The SPDC doesn't sympathise with the difficulties of the villagers. For Maternity and Child Welfare [MMCWA], they gave 100 forms to our village, but we haven't done anything yet. I know that the villagers don't understand anything about these organisations, but when SPDC demands money from them they are used to paying without knowing or understanding why."*

- Naw L— (F, 34), village head, T— village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

*"The TPDC [Township Peace and Development Council] and VPDC [Village Peace and Development Council] forced the villagers to organise themselves as the Maternal and Child Welfare [MMCWA] and Myanmar Women's Affairs [Federation]. They forced the women in the villages to organise this. If her husband is village head, she must become the [MMCWA or MWAf] village head, and if her husband is village secretary then she must become the secretary. They don't care if they're literate or illiterate, even illiterate women were chosen to be the leaders and secretaries. Now we have 27 women in Myanmar Women's Affairs and 7 women in MMCWA. They didn't get any training about these organisations and they don't need to do anything, but each woman had to pay 500 kyat to join these organisations."*

- A— (M, 43), village head, T— village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

## **Deprivation of livelihood**

Deprivation of livelihood covers a wide array of abuses frequent in Karen areas such as extortion, looting, land confiscation and destruction of property. SPDC authorities require military units operating in Karen State to 'live off the land', a practice predictably leading to the rampant extortion from villagers of food, money and other belongings in support of the military presence in the region. Often this extortion is labelled as 'tax' in an attempt to present it with some

kind of legitimacy, but these 'taxes' are arbitrary, excessive and extralegal. On top of this, the culture of impunity present in the ranks of the SPDC and DKBA fosters entrepreneurial exploitation - where individual soldiers are free to extort at whim - as well as chronic theft and looting of villagers' possessions. Looting, unlike extortion, is done without any direct threat or attempt at justification. The army confiscates land for the construction of bases, establishment of military agricultural fields or for sale to domestic and international business interests. Soldiers often destroy property as punishment on spurious charges or to undermine villagers' capacity to survive in non-SPDC controlled areas. The relentless nature of these abuses prevents villagers from establishing any adequate form of social security or even meeting their immediate subsistence needs.

Abuses associated with deprivation of livelihood are generally indiscriminate of gender. The distinction is therefore in the effects such abuses have on men and women within their differing roles. As women's work tends to fall within unremunerated household labour, there is increased pressure for them to engage in new occupations to compensate for the loss of food, money, supplies or land taken or destroyed by military forces. Not only are women expected to maintain their traditional household and child-rearing tasks, but they may also need to spend more time labouring in agricultural fields, tending small cash crops, raising livestock or engaging in daily wage labour in nearby towns or larger villages.

*"Sometimes when the SPDC military has entered the village they have looted villager's ducks and chickens and this has harmed women a lot because they usually raise the livestock as income for their family. It makes women feel so bad when they lose their livestock. Both females and males feel so sad about this but females suffer more than males because they raise the livestock."*

- Naw S— (F, 22), N— village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

For women living in areas which the SPDC is trying to depopulate, deprivation of livelihood takes the more brutal form of systematic destruction or landmining of their crop fields and food storage sheds, massacres of their livestock and the burning of their homes and belongings.<sup>7</sup> This not only creates displacement, it also forces women into extremely dangerous activities including foraging for jungle foods in landmined areas, working in exposed fields where they risk being shot on sight by passing SPDC patrols, and sneaking into SPDC-controlled villages to buy supplies despite the risk of

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<sup>7</sup> See for example *Papun Update: SPDC attacks on villages continue* (KHRG #2006-F10, October 2006), *SPDC attacks on villages in Nyaunglebin and Papun Districts and the civilian response* (KHRG #2006-F9, September 2006), and *Toungoo District: The civilian response to human rights violations* (KHRG #2006-F8, August 2006).

being arrested as a hill villager. While displaced communities overwhelmingly seek to return to their abandoned villages once soldiers depart, the destruction of their homes and livestock and the deployment of landmines in and around houses, farm fields and village paths hinder their ability to rebuild their lives and presents pervasive threats to personal security.



These piglets died from starvation after their owners fled from SPDC attacks against their homes in Ku Day village in the Yeh Loh area during July 2006 and were unable to return to feed them. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## **Detention and torture**

Torture conducted under the rubric of ‘counter insurgency’ is pervasive in Karen areas. This abuse is perpetrated in order to enforce compliance with military orders, punish suspected KNU supporters and sympathisers, extort funds, instil an overall climate of fear, or a combination of these. The culture of impunity under which SPDC and DKBA forces operate fosters further mistreatment and torture of villagers by military units. Villagers live in situations of heightened vulnerability where they are prone to beatings and mistreatment by individual soldiers who may wander into their village to loot, deliver orders or simply loiter. While the torture and mistreatment of villagers may not always stem from specific military orders, such abuses serve the overall SPDC objective of militarising Karen territory and cultivating a situation where villagers are easily exploited.

*"Maybe she didn't inform them in Lay Kay when the people [KNU] held a meeting. Grandfather Operations Commander [KNLA] came back and held a meeting with the students here. She didn't inform the Burmese about that, so when the Burmese found out, Burmese Captain Bo Myint came and hit her. The Burmese hit her back eight times, shot a gun beside her ear and tied her to a coconut tree."*

- Daw M— (F, 38), village head, — village, Thaton District (July 2003)

*"The same day they arrested P—, and accused her of connections with us [KNLA]. She is also from Naung Kaing, and she is over 50 years old. The SLORC said her husband was one of our members, but actually they're just ordinary villagers. They saw her outside her village and she told them she was a villager. They asked her about our movements but she said she didn't know anything because she hadn't gone anywhere. They accused her of taking rice to Karen soldiers because she was wearing a big towel on her head. Then they tied the towel over her face and kicked her to the ground, and then two or three soldiers walked and jumped on her body and threw water on the towel so she couldn't breathe. But they didn't get any information from her, because she didn't know anything about us. Because of this, the villagers are always afraid and live in terror. The SLORC always demands that people report anything they know about KNLA, and if they don't give information they are punished. Now the Ko Per Baw ["Yellow Headscarves", i.e. DKBA] are also controlling and watching, so the villagers are left with no choice [but to tell], and it is difficult for us."*

- KNLA officer, Dooplaya District (July 1995)

As men often flee upon arrival of military personnel, women are left to protect children, the elderly and household belongings. When soldiers see single women with children and no men, they accuse them of being the wives or mothers of resistance fighters and detain them. In many of these cases the officers know that the woman has no resistance connections, so they release her upon payment of a ransom. If there is any real suspicion, she is tortured and told she will be killed if her husband/son doesn't surrender. The torture, murder and mutilation of women serve as exemplary punishment to threaten other villagers. Alternatively, these women may arbitrarily be taken into detention by soldiers who use them as hostages, demanding that their husbands 'surrender'.



On April 11<sup>th</sup> 2000 27-year-old Naw P— was at home in Papun District when an SPDC unit came and arrested her and her six-year-old son. They tied both of their hands and then tied the two of them together, shaved her head and said that her husband had been with a KNLA group that ambushed an SPDC truck killing three women, even though no such attack had happened. They sent her hair and an earring to the village head with an order to forward it to her husband (with the idea that her husband would then come and surrender; her husband, a former DKBA soldier, was subsequently connected to the village militia formed by the KNLA). She and her son were detained for three days without any food whatsoever, their hands tied the whole time, and then were taken to another village and tied and detained there; Naw P— said the soldiers untied only one of her hands for the journey, and she had to carry her son the whole way. Upon arrival she and her son were tied under a house for another three to four days, during which the commander ordered that she be given neither food nor any chance to bathe. However, she says his soldiers pitied her and some of

*“When we arrived there [at Tat Tu, Nyaunglebin District] they made a special place to keep us like a prison, and at about 7:00 p.m. they took me out and interrogated me. They said, ‘If you ask your husband to come here do you think he’ll come?’ and I said ‘No’. They said, ‘If your husband doesn’t come we’ll do bad things to you,’ and I said, ‘You can do whatever you want, because I’m in your hands now and there’s nothing I can do.’ They kept telling me to write a letter to my husband but I told them I couldn’t write, so they told one of the other villagers there to write a letter for me and then they ordered another man to go deliver it. The next morning they put me back in the lockup, and they said ‘We asked your husband to come here but he wouldn’t, so you’ll be the one to suffer.’ I said, ‘Go ahead, there’s nothing I can do,’ and they said, ‘We can wait. If he doesn’t come here then we’ll never let you out.’”*

- Naw T— (F, 28), L— village, Nyaunglebin District (Sep 1994)

Village heads, many of whom are now women, are frequently detained by Army officers and sometimes beaten for failing to comply with Army demands.

This threat has been made explicit in SPDC order documents sent to village heads which warn that non-compliance will be severely punished. Sometimes they are detained until their villagers can ransom them, or until the village complies with the demand. The following order, one of many similar documents received by KHRG, exemplifies such practice.

To:

Date: 20-1-2001

Chairperson

xxxx Village

The *loh ah pay* [*forced labour workers*] from the Elder's village flee very often, so as soon as this letter is received the Elder yourself must come to send 2 *loh ah pay* people to the sawmill near yyyy, to arrive on 20-1-2001. If [*you*] fail, the Elder will be tied up with rope.

For the *loh ah pay* who fled, [*bring a fine of*] 2 packets of jaggery and 2 bowls [4 kg/8.8 lb] of sticky-rice.

[*Sd.*]

(for) Column Commander

Women taken for forced labour are also subject to increased likelihood of abuse. Women forced to work as messengers, guides, sentries or porters or labour on construction projects are beaten, mistreated, and sometimes raped.

*"They captured four women and the Ko Per Baw [DKBA soldier with the column as a guide] said that one of them was the wife of a KNU soldier. They kicked and beat her, but she was pregnant and one of the Burmese officers came and said, 'If you beat her don't beat her on the abdomen, beat her on the head.' She lost two teeth. They kept treating her like that all along the way. She was from Plah Hta village. Her husband used to be a KNU soldier, but not any longer.... They used the four women as porters for more than one month, then when they arrived in Papun people who knew the women came and asked for their release, so they released three of the women but they said the other was a KNU member's wife so she would have to follow them. She was with her son, about eight years old. They kicked her to kill her. Then she couldn't walk any more so they knocked her down on the road and stomped on her neck. After she stopped breathing they took off her sarong and other clothes, and they took her son away with them. I saw all of this with my own eyes. It was Battalion 548, and I was with them as a porter."*

- Saw H— (M, 46), L— village, Papun District (May 1997)

Soldiers perpetrate these abuses in a context of deteriorating respect for women. The hierarchical model of a society run by an all-male military which the SPDC is trying to create cannot function properly if the respect for women ingrained in all of Burma's cultures is retained; as civilians, women must be dehumanised and placed below the military. The respect ascribed to women in both traditional Karen and Burman society, discussed in Section III above, has severely eroded through military orders involving the abuse of women. Order documents regularly state that "all male and female villagers" are to perform forced labour, or that soldiers will kill any villager, male or female, attempting to remain in a village targeted for relocation. Whereas historically, propriety demanded that young men treat older women with deference, the systematic abuses involved in the militarisation of Karen State have led to a breakdown of social norms. Thus far, villagers have sometimes been able to mitigate SPDC demands by appointing elderly women as village heads to confront SPDC officers, and these officers frequently display embarrassment and confusion in front of these women as they struggle between their ingrained values and their orders from above; to counter this, however, the SPDC sometimes forces villages to revert to male village heads, and has increased its pressure on field officers to assert their authority over village heads. Many women have told KHRG of their shock at the way SPDC officers and even ordinary soldiers address them, and at the lack of shame shown by soldiers who loot everything in front of them, even kitchen utensils and women's underwear. The disrespect of villagers in general and elderly women in particular, encouraged through the military's culture of impunity, has in turn served to promote a situation conducive to even further abuse.

*"Yes, they [SPDC soldiers] beat one married woman named P—. She is around 70 years old. When they were looting her children's paddy she told them, 'It will all be gone, then we will have no paddy to eat.' Then they took a stick and beat her once and kicked her once. She dared not complain [to the commander] because the commander and the soldiers are the same."*

- Saw N— (M, 50), P— village, Pa'an District (Aug 1999)

*"One bottle of alcohol is 1,000 kyat and he [a Karen Peace Force<sup>8</sup> soldier] forced me to buy two bottles and pay for it myself. After he was drunk I asked him to pay the cost – one bottle is 1,000 kyat, so two bottles is 2,000 kyat. But he told me, 'Don't talk so much. I will stomp my heel on the back of your neck!' I told him, 'Thank you so much for saying that, because I've never heard words like that spoken before.'"*

- Naw K— (F, 53), village head, N— village, Dooplaya district (Jan 2006)

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<sup>8</sup> Karen Peace Force is an armed group that agreed to a ceasefire with the SPDC in 1997 and now works together with SPDC forces.

## Sexual abuse and rape

Although not as frequent as detention and torture, local villagers regularly inform KHRG researchers about incidents of rape by individuals and groups of soldiers operating in Karen State. As a consequence of the militarisation of the region, and the culture of impunity fostered in the ranks of the army, women are placed in situations of heightened vulnerability to such abuse. Furthermore, while specific incidents of rape may not derive from direct orders, they serve to cultivate fear and intimidation among victims and the wider community. This fear serves to support military control over Karen society and challenges villagers' will to resist demands. It also serves to dehumanise women, which is necessary if the SPDC's vision of a hierarchical society controlled by an all-male military is to be achieved. Soldiers exploit not only socio-cultural power disparities between men and women but also those between the military and the villagers. The structures of militarisation thus compound those of gender to create an environment supportive of rape.

Incidents of rape occur most commonly in those villages under military control that are located near army bases or temporary camps. Soldiers and officers are prone to wander into the villages to loot property, look for women, or just relieve their boredom. The likelihood of rape increases where women are isolated from their village in situations of forced labour at military bases and camps, other forced labour sites, or even while working in their fields, and especially so where soldiers have been drinking. SPDC soldiers, and particularly officers, can rape women with impunity. Perpetrators are almost never punished and women who try to file complaints are either threatened or offered bribes to keep quiet. In some situations, soldiers temporarily stationed near a particular village have forced local women to marry them. When the soldier's patrol departs, the woman is abandoned and left stigmatised by the short term sexual relations into which she was forced.

*"In 2004, around June, SPDC Light Infantry Battalion #308 came to our village on operations. One of their soldiers named Htun Win Ko forced a woman in the village named N— to marry him, but after only one month he left when his unit rotated out, and he left N— in the village pregnant. Later she delivered twin children. N— is an orphan, her parents are already dead and she lives with her grandmother. The village leaders went to report this to the NCO<sup>9</sup> of the new SPDC unit, but he didn't care about it."*

— Saw B— (M, 49), village head, T— village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

*"I had gone to see a movie and then came back to sleep. A soldier came to my house and called me. I did not know that it was a soldier calling me. I thought he was a villager because he called me in the*

*Karen language 'naw... naw' [sister... sister] and I responded to him. He climbed up to my house. He had gotten drunk at the wedding and he asked me 'where is your husband?' and I replied that my husband was not at home as he had gone to the wedding house. Then I started to stand up to flee but he caught me. I jumped down [out of her house] to the ground and he caught me again. He did not carry his gun when he came to my house. When he caught me I struggled, and he showed me his fist. I am a woman weaker than him. In the end he raped me but I did not want to have sex with him. No one was near my home because everyone had gone to look at the movie show at the wedding place."*

- Naw P— (F, 31), W—, Papun District (May 2006)

Traditional notions of propriety lead many rape victims to remain silent about the abuse. Families are also reluctant to make the incident known to the wider community. Stigmatisation by the community is the likely outcome should the rape become public knowledge. Furthermore, no action is generally taken when women report being raped to local SPDC commanding officers. They are commonly told to stop spreading rumours and may even be punished. Such attitudes promote a sense of shame in the victim. This self-perception compounds the already traumatic nature of the incident. Single women may thereafter be shunned and find it more difficult to get married. This is especially the case where the rape leads to pregnancy. In some cases women have been ostracised from their community, or even by their husbands.

*"I have faced many problems because an SPDC [soldier] raped me. Now I feel so ashamed in front of other people. I dare not look at others in the face."*

- Naw P— (F, 31), W— village, Papun District (May 2006)

*"I knew a woman named Naw Klee who was raped by a Burmese soldier. She was my Aunty. She was arrested and raped while she was travelling in the forest. When she came back we couldn't ask her anything because she was so distraught."*

- Naw P— (F, 29), T— village, Papun District (March 2006)

*"After women have been raped, we help them as we can but people who have been insulted have problems and feel sad for themselves. Some of them were single so they will continue their future with sadness. After they have been raped their relatives encourage them. Now I know two of them who have married and another one who has not."*

- Saw H— (M, 30), T— village, Nyaunglebin District (Nov 2005)

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<sup>9</sup> Non-commissioned officers include corporals, lance corporals, sergeants and sergeant-majors.

## Killing

*"If the SPDC [soldiers] could capture us they would kill us without caring whether we were male or female."*

- Naw P— (F, 25), K— village, Nyaunglebin District (July 2006)

SPDC and DKBA forces kill villagers with impunity. Most frequently those killed are villagers living in areas outside of SPDC control. When the army comes across these villagers in the forest, in their fields, or in the course of an organised offensive targeting their villages, they are shot on sight. In many cases it is clear that the soldiers know their targets are women, children or the elderly, but they open fire regardless. When systematically depopulating areas, SPDC officers commonly tell village leaders that after the specified deadline to leave their village anyone seen there, whether man, woman or child, will be considered as 'enemy' and eliminated.

*"She left the house and went to the betelnut plantation. When she was coming back, the enemy [SPDC] saw her. When they saw her, they shouted out to her and shot her dead straight away. They then took the betelnut leaves that she was carrying. They were from IB #75. Their commander is Commander Win Naung. It happened at nine o'clock on June 8<sup>th</sup> 2001 at xxxx [village]. Her name was Naw Pa Leh and she was my daughter. She was only nine years old. She studied in Kindergarten B."*

- Saw P— (M), K— village, Toungoo District (June 2001)

*"On June 28<sup>th</sup> a skirmish occurred in the K'Thwee Dee area when they were sending their soldiers to Than Daung Gyi. When they came back on the path, they met a village woman at K'Thwee Dee village. That village woman was working in her betelnut plantation. She was weeding the grass and cleaning. They shot her and it hit her body and then she was dead. Her name was Naw Kee Keh. She was over 40 years old. I don't know if she had children or not, I only know her name. They were IB #55 and the name of their column commander was Tin Myo Kaing."*

- KHRG field researcher, Toungoo District (Aug 2000)

Stamp:

No. 263 Infantry Battalion  
Tha Pyay Nyunt camp

To: Chairman (Village LORC)  
xxxx village

Date: 1-7-1995

Subject: Relocation of mountain villages

1. Regarding the above subject, as soon as you receive this letter, the mountain villages must move to and settle in Tha Pyay Nyunt resettlement village within 10 days and not later than (10-7-1995).
2. If you fail to report before the deadline, the Tatmadaw will march into your village. The villages-in-hiding will be burned down and attacked with guns. The hill fields will be burnt and destroyed.
3. Each village has to report to Tha Pyay Nyunt camp and resettlement village by the deadline. If they fail to report, I warn you again that serious action will be taken.

*[Sd.]*

Camp Commander  
Tha Pyay Nyunt Army Camp  
Frontline #263 Infantry Battalion

*[Note: The 'resettlement village' and the army camp that issued this order are at the same place. This is a duplicated typed order with the name of the village and the deadline date written in; it was sent to several villages.]*

Soldiers also frequently kill villagers in areas under military control. Such murder functions as punishment for disobeying orders, or as a warning to enforce villagers' compliance with demands or to prevent them from passing on information about abuses. The killing of women in particular frequently occurs following other abuses such as rape or torture. Soldiers kill those they rape so that the victim cannot inform other villagers or military officers about the event. Those labelled as KNU sympathisers or supporters are tortured and killed, their bodies left mutilated as a warning to other villagers. For women, this typically happens when male villagers have fled the fields or forest in order to avoid SPDC patrols. Furthermore, if villagers are seen running from approaching soldiers, they are presumed to be enemies and shot before any questions are asked.

*"They [members of the SPDC's Sa Thon Lon Guerrilla Retaliation units] cut out people's tongues, cut their ears off and cover their faces with their own intestines. They do that so the villagers will be afraid. Now if we hear their voices, our hands and knees tremble and we can't do*

*anything. The women are very afraid of them... all the villagers are afraid of them."*

- Saw H— (M, 25), T— village, Nyaunglebin District (Dec 1998)

*"After we went far away from there they came to the mother in that night time and said, 'Sister, now the commander has asked us to go to him.' But that girl didn't dare to go. She came to take her blanket and they shot and killed that girl. Earlier that evening they [SPDC soldiers] had raped that girl. When that girl came back to her mother and her mother asked her about what had happened to her she said, 'Mom, don't ask me about that. They did everything to me.' Her voice had changed and sounded like a male duck. She was almost 20 years old.... They [SPDC soldiers later] shot her once and killed her... They shot and killed that girl because they were afraid that people would know they had raped that girl. So they shot and killed that girl."*

- Daw K— (F, 67), T— village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2002)

*"A Burmese soldier shot and killed my niece about eight years ago. I did not know his name but he was the Burmese soldier and lived in Ta Paw camp. He raped her and then killed her. He was a sergeant. He didn't rape her in the village. It happened when she went to carry water in the camp for the soldiers. He caught her and dragged her into his bunker and raped her. She was single. As she could not keep silent about her suffering, she mentioned it to the leader. Then, the sergeant who raped her shot at her and said that his gun had accidentally fired at her. Her name was Naw Lu Htoo and she was 18 years old... People didn't dare to complain about them [the SPDC soldiers] because if you complained about them, they would threaten and beat you."*

- Saw B— (M, 38), T— village, Thaton District (Aug 2005)

**Stamp:**

#231 Infantry Battalion  
Column #1

To: Village Head  
xxxx village

From your village, children, men and all the villagers are absolutely (absolutely) not allowed out of the village on September 27 / 28 / 29, Thadin Kyut Hla Zan [waxing] 7 / 8 / 9. Don't go at all for looking after your cattle, buffalos, farm affairs or picking vegetables. Inform the village that they will be shot and arrested if the Columns find out [that they are going out of the village].

Place: Temporary - Mobile [camp]  
Date: 26-9-98

[Sd.]  
Intelligence Officer  
#231 Infantry Battalion



Naw Pay Thwe, a 35-year-old woman in Painkaladon village, Dooplaya District, lies dead after SPDC soldiers from Infantry Battalion #78 shot her at close range once in the head, once in the ribs, and once in the right leg simply because she stepped out of her shop in front of them when they were following a group of KNLA soldiers during the 'ceasefire' in March 2005. [Photo: KHRG]

Despite the indiscriminate nature of such killing, gender roles within the family result in effects particular to women; not so much when they are killed, but rather when the victims of SPDC attacks are male family members. Where male family members are killed, women, who are heavily bound to the role of primary caregiver within the household, lose the productive labour of husbands or fathers that had previously provided much of the family's subsistence base. In effect, the killing of women's husbands and fathers functions as a form of deprivation of livelihood that undermines women's ability to remain primarily engaged in household labour as this work is not essentially subsistence oriented.

*"My husband was killed by our enemies, the Burmese soldiers. They shot him dead on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2006. The Burmese soldiers shot and killed my husband beside the hill field at Ler Klaw Kee. My husband went to the forest and he went to clear his hill field. The Burmese soldiers saw him and shot at him and he ran away to the other side but his leg got caught on a log and he fell down and injured himself. The SPDC rushed to him; they stabbed and shot him many times and he died. The SPDC soldiers shot and killed my husband on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2006 at 6:00 am. The SPDC soldiers who shot and killed my husband were*

*from Poe Mu Koh camp. If the SPDC soldiers had not shot my husband they might have shot and killed many other people who were cutting and clearing bushes in the hill fields. We have ten hill fields there. Other people ran away when they heard the gunshots. My husband's name was Saw Wai Htoo and he was 29 years old."*

- Naw A— (F, 29), M— village, Papun District (May 2006)

*"The husbands and children of some women have died and they are facing many troubles. My sister's husband was shot dead... by the Burmese, so she must work hard and she never gets enough rice."*

- Pee H— (F, 75), D— village, Papun District, (Sep 2005)

*"I don't get enough food from my work. I don't have enough food for my children. I want to send my eldest child to school but I can't, so I had to ask him to leave school. We have to live and work day by day and we don't get enough food. I owe money to other people. This is why my family is faced with a lot of problems. In the past I sent my son and my daughter to school in Taw Oo [Toungoo], but now I can't send them there anymore. I have called all of them to the jungle. My husband is already dead. The Burmese [soldiers] killed my husband and now I am a widow and I have to stay with my children. The soldier who killed my husband was one of the guerrilla troops [Dam Byan Byaut Kya]. My husband died because of the SPDC. I have to work for the food for my children. I can't do anything and I have had to ask my son to leave school. He wants to go to school but I can't do anything. My younger children want to go to Taw Oo to learn, but I can't send them to school. It is because I have to be both their mother and their father. I pity my children because I cannot look after them well."*

- Naw P— (F, 40), P— village, Toungoo District (March 2003)

## Health

*"The problems we faced on the way were due to the Burmese [soldiers] following close behind us... We tried to carry our food and our children, so we couldn't carry other things like clothes and blankets. We carried just enough rice for us to eat. If we got a fever or illness we had to stay sick because we didn't have enough medicine on the way. We had to stay next to a fire if it was cold, and our clothes and blankets were torn and burned. The children were sick at that time, but we didn't have any pills to heal them, so we suffered like that until we arrived here."*

- Naw M— (F, 44), K—, Dooplaya District (Jan 2000)

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates SPDC expenditures on health to be a mere 2.8% of GDP,<sup>10</sup> and even this is probably a gross overestimate

because it is based on figures provided by the SPDC. To make matters worse, the limited funds provided for health services are overwhelmingly directed towards urban areas in central Burma. Moreover, the systematic human rights abuses associated with the militarisation of Karen State bears a clear correlation to poor health conditions of local villagers.<sup>11</sup> In this context, women face particular risks to their health. Common health issues in Karen State include malnutrition, malaria, HIV/AIDS, “gastric problems, coughs, anaemia, worms, chest infections and skin disease”<sup>12</sup> as well as colds, respiratory infections, digestive problems, diarrhoea, dysentery, skin infections, vitamin deficiencies, dizziness, fatigue and depression.<sup>13</sup>

*“Many people got sick when we had to run away from the SPDC and were hiding in the forest. We didn’t have enough medicine to treat them, but we tried our best and gave them treatment with the little medicine that we had.”*

- Naw B— (F), Toungoo District (Feb 2006)

Due to forced displacement, women living in hiding must give birth in unhygienic conditions where they risk both their own and their child’s lives. An independent study of the health conditions in Karen State conducted by the Back Pack Health Worker Teams, an organisation sending mobile medical teams throughout Karen and other areas, suggests that “as many as one in 12 women will die from pregnancy-related complications.”<sup>14</sup> Beyond the direct health risks for women, complications during pregnancy mean that many births are stillborn. Malnutrition, amplified by the SPDC’s destruction of paddy fields and food stores and blockades of trade routes, poses severe dangers to infants and pregnant women in particular. In Karen areas the infant mortality rate, measured as the number of children under the age of five to die per one thousand, is currently measured to be 106 – or just over 10%.<sup>15</sup> As women are primarily responsible for the rearing of children, the high rates of infant deaths directly affect their roles as caregivers within the household.

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<sup>10</sup> Myanmar: Core Health Indicators 2006. World Health Organisation, Accessed at [www.who.int/countries/mmr/en/](http://www.who.int/countries/mmr/en/) on September 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>11</sup> This has been shown in the report *Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, Back Pack Health Worker Teams, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> *Medical Mission to IDPs: Southern Karen State March/April 2005*, August 28<sup>th</sup> 2005, accessed at [www.freeburmarangers.org](http://www.freeburmarangers.org) on September 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Toungoo District: Civilians displaced by dams, roads, and military control* (KHRG #2005-F7, August 2005).

<sup>14</sup> *Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, Back Pack Health Worker Team, 2006, p.11.

## Education

The education level in Burma has been rapidly declining as the SPDC neglects investment in this sector; favouring increased spending on the military instead. The British Government's Department for International Development has noted the *"extraordinarily low levels of government funding for education in Burma (0.3% of GDP); the low quality and high cost of participation [and] the inaccessibility of schools in many areas."*<sup>16</sup> These factors are particularly salient in the rural areas of Karen State where systematic deprivation of livelihood undermines the ability of parents to send their children to attend school. As the military expands its presence in the area and increases demands on local villagers, girls are often expected to help look after young siblings while mothers invest more time and energy in subsistence work. School-aged girls may thus have no available time in which they can attend school. Boys on the other hand may be assigned specific tasks to assist their families, but these typically consist more of short term duties such as foraging for food or firewood.

To make matters even more constraining for girls, limited facilities mean that schools may only be open in neighbouring towns or larger villages. Students may have to travel long distances across fields and through forests. Not only is this option for girl students hindered by traditional proscriptions against women and girls travelling far from their home villages, but parents also often worry that their daughters



Teenage girls from K— village in Bilin township of Thaton district working in the fields in January 2006. These girls told KHRG they would prefer to be in school, but they have to work in the fields instead because their parents have to spend much of their time doing forced labour for the SPDC and DKBA. [Photo KHRG]

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>16</sup> *Country Profiles: Burma*, UK Department of International Development, October 4<sup>th</sup> 2005. Accessed at [www.dfid.gov.uk/countries/asia/burma.asp](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/countries/asia/burma.asp) on September 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.

ters will be attacked and raped while travelling through these areas. As a consequence, parents may keep their daughters at home while sending only their sons to attend class.

*“Parents who will send their daughters to school in other places first look for a good school and good security for the daughter. The parents don’t want to send their daughters to go far away from their village to find money. Married women say that if they send their daughters, they will get very worried. So, they don’t dare to send their daughters to go far away because of the security for women.”*

- Naw S— (F, 22), N— village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

*“Children have go school to Wa Wai Lay because we have no school in W—. Not all children can attend school because their parents cannot support them to attend the school. The school was established by villagers. It goes up to grade four and there are two teachers. Teachers instruct in English and Burmese languages. Teachers come from Klaw Htah. Starting from grade two the fee for one student is 3,000 kyat for one year. But all of the expenses for one student in a year may be over 20,000 kyat.”*

- Naw P— (F, 44), village head, W— village, Papun District (Jan 2006)



Young girls from W— village, Papun District travel through the forest to attend school in another area after a local SPDC officer, Htun Aung, would not allow their village to open a middle school in 2006. [Photo KHRG]

The education situation in military-controlled relocation sites is even more dismal. The SPDC does not provide funds for schools and travel to neighbouring villages where facilities may exist is highly restricted. Furthermore, local SPDC officers frequently limit the level up to which a given school may provide education. Many village schools are thus not allowed to continue beyond the fourth standard (primary school). Where permitted, villagers must support the construction of schools themselves and finance teaching staff. In some cases the KNU or Karen Education Department (KED) may provide assistance in the form of finances or materials to support the establishment of a school. However, securing additional funds to pay for school and teachers is difficult for families already burdened by the excessive 'taxation' extorted from them by military forces. As a consequence, there is a lack of facilities or, where facilities do exist, many villagers are unable to meet the fee requirements and their children cannot attend. This may exacerbate gender-based illiteracy, as parents who are only able to support the education of some of their children may prioritise boys over girls.

*"I could not send my children to school because we are struggling for our daily food and facing the operations of Burmese soldiers in our area."*

- Naw T— (F, 49) L— village, Papun District (Sep 2005)

*"The book fees for one kindergarten student are about 3,000 kyat. A student above fourth standard might have to pay 5,000 kyat to 6,000 kyat. Now we have eight students and as far as we know for this situation, a student may have to pay 10,000 kyat for the books not including their food. They allowed us to teach the Karen language. There are over 200 students and the estimated students from fifth to eighth standards are about sixty. If they finished the eight standards, they would go to study in Kya In Seik Gyi or Kawkareik or Moulmein or Pa'an or other places as they wish to go. Although parents could send their children to school, not every parent can do that. The SPDC military didn't help us. Now our village has a plan to help them with the books and boarding fees."*

- Naw M— (F, 32) H— village, Dooplaya District (March 2005)

## V. Women's Responses to Abuses and Changing Roles

*"I think that women ought to be teachers, nurses and leaders. Also, I want my daughters to be like that but I could not send them [to school]. Some people go to study at the other places and when they come back they can work and do these kinds of work. If my husband was alive, he would have to be the head of the household. But now I have to be the head of the household."*

- Naw T— (F, 64), K— village , Dooplaya District (Sep 2006)

Whether or not military forces directly target women as such, the effects of abuses differently impact men and women villagers in Karen society as a consequence of differences in gender roles. With some specific types of abuse, such as rape and sexual violence, soldiers do directly target women. However, for the vast majority of abuses which serve to support local structures of military power the significant difference between men and women is not in how they are targeted, but rather in the effects such violations have on them. These effects are to a large extent conditioned by the different roles that men and women have traditionally held within Karen society.

As the patterns of military abuse differently affect men and women, their responses have also necessarily reflected this difference. Given that women's responses to abuse and particular strategies of resistance are dependent on the local context, they have served to reshape the roles that women play within Karen society and redefine the identities of Karen women. These changes are not sweeping uniformly across Karen society, but rather are conditioned by the situation and responses of individual women. Notable changes are evident in the roles that Karen women occupy in their labour, as village heads, educators and students, medics, migrants and community support networks. These roles are not mutually exclusive as women may hold multiple, often overlapping, identities. The active choices of Karen women to respond to their individual situations of abuse have led to diverse changes in these roles and the identities of women across the spectrum of Karen society.

### Women's working roles

*"In my life, as I am a woman, I have had to raise my children with difficulty. I have had to find daily wage work and sell things so that my children could have a chance to go to school... I have to work as a man because I have only my mother and my father in my house. My siblings don't live close to us. I have a plantation so I plant rubber in my plantation to earn [money for] my life... Now I come here or go somewhere to buy*

*things and go back to sell them in my village to earn money. I can earn a livelihood in this way for my children. I want my children to be able to come and go as other people do. So I have to work."*

- Naw P— (F, 40), H—, Doooplaya District (Aug 2006)

Demands for forced labour and extortion or destruction of crops, livestock and belongings are forcing families to produce twice as much as they would otherwise need simply to make up for the artificial shortfall and survive. With men already working full time on food and income generation, it is women and children who are finding they have to double their work outside the house to achieve this. Women now have to produce a full day's work in the fields and a full day's work around the household all in the space of 24 hours, putting their health and that of their children at risk. Making matters worse, the process of militarisation has led to a decreasing number of men remaining within Karen households. This situation has developed due to higher proportions of men fleeing from, or being detained or killed by, military forces as well as their more frequent participation in the armed opposition. The disproportionately low male demographic in eastern Burma has been further documented in studies conducted by independent cross-border medical teams which have reported an overall male to female ratio of 0.9 to 1.<sup>17</sup> With male family members absent or dead, women have had to take on the tasks traditionally ascribed to men as head of the household. Although men and women have traditionally shared most forms of labour in Karen society, men have been typically more involved in heavy field work, trading and travel to neighbouring villages and towns. This has especially been the case in families with children, where the woman is expected to take care of infants and therefore engage less in field work and other extra-household labour.

With or without husbands and fathers, the increasing demands by the military and family obligations are placing increasing burdens on women, forcing them to do more of the agricultural and income-generating labour. Household work in support of her family must thus be balanced alongside work out in the fields or production of commodities to sell. At times, women take young children out to the fields so they can watch them while engaged in agricultural labour. Women's time and energies are thus stretched to compensate for the loss or inadequacy of men's labour. Even if the men are still present, women's encroachment into traditionally male labour while still maintaining their full responsibilities for the house, finances, family health and children means that women are increasingly acting as heads of households, even if not recognised as such.

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<sup>17</sup> *Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, Back Pack Health Worker Team, 2006, p.30.



A woman from Kaw Mee Koh village, Toungoo District makes leaf shingles to be used in the construction of a temporary shelter following the destruction of her home by SPDC troops from LIB #10 operating under column commander Soe Myint on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2006. [Photo: KHRG]

*“On April 15<sup>th</sup> 2006 the SPDC killed my son-in-law at Klah Per Koh. They shot him in his chest, arm and bladder. After he died, his wife had to confront many difficulties and problems. Now she must take over the responsibilities that he had while he was alive.”*

- Naw W— (F, 56), T— village, Papun District (May 2006)

The increased labour or the absence of a husband or father is causing many women to take on alternate work. Such work includes growing cash crops for sale at local or regional markets or travelling to towns and larger villages to trade or search for daily wage labour. As women must travel out of their home villages, such occupations take them out of their traditional village-centred roles. They must take on different responsibilities and develop new skills to manage within more diverse surroundings. As women increasingly engage in such non-traditional labour, they challenge conceptions of women's work as solely intra-household in nature and confined to their home village. Though this can be empowering, it is also exhausting because none of their traditional workload has been reduced.

*“My two siblings and I became orphans and have done hill fields by ourselves... I am feeding chickens and pigs for sale. If I get money, I will buy cotton and weave clothes for my children.”*

- Naw Y— (F, 65), N— village, Papun District (Sep 2005)

*"If I do not have enough food, I borrow some money from others to buy food... sometime Burmese soldiers harass us on the way to buy food. We have raised some livestock and sold it in order to repay our debt."*

- Naw R— (F, 39), B— village, Toungoo District (March 2006)

*"For my part I feel that if I don't have money, I need to do something for my income so I have to find work. If I have to sell noodles or do some small selling of clothes, it is good. People will not gossip about us. If we don't work, we don't have an income. So as for me, [I] usually sell things. If I don't work who will help me to raise my children? The time for my children is like a new leaf and the time for me is a time like the old yellow leaves that start falling down."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District, (Sep 2006)

Where the military demands forced labour, the capacities of women are stretched even further. Not only must they balance field and household work, but they must do so under time and energy constraints brought about by forced labour. The men of the household may be too afraid to confront the soldiers while doing the labour, or they may be needed to work in the family fields. If possible, women may hire someone to take their place in forced labour duty so that they can remain at home to engage in household or field work. However, demands for forced labour come frequently and replacements cannot be hired every time, so young children are often left at home alone while mothers go to serve the military. Some mothers make the even harder decision to send a child to perform forced labour so that the parents can continue working for the livelihood of the rest of the family. The situation is even harder for women heading households alone, so some villages work out a rotation system to minimise the forced labour demanded of woman-headed households.

*"If my husband is not at home when they [the soldiers] arrive to demand the quota [of labourers] and if I have money, I hire a person to carry in my place."*

- Ma A— (F, 22), M— village, Papun District (Jan 2006)

*"A 14- or 15-year-old girl and I had to carry a load at that time because my husband was not at home and that girl's parents were not at home. My husband and her parents had gone to cut cane in the forest. We had to carry their provisions because they [SPDC soldiers] came to us and we had to go... No one could look after my children. I left them at home. They cried a lot during that time. My little son got a fever from malaria. I had no time to look after him as I had to go because the village head ordered me urgently to carry the SPDC loads. I carried for over ten days."*

- Naw M— (F, 38), K— village, Papun District (Dec 2005)



Children from K— village in Pa'an township of Thaton District performing forced labour for the SPDC on the Kyaik Khaw-Lay Kay car road in May 2004. All of the villages lying on or close to the path of the road were ordered to collect stone that were to be later used in the road's construction. Because it was a crucial time in the crop cycle, many of the workers were teenage girls and boys and younger children whose parents needed to remain at work in the fields. *[Photo: KHRG]*

After returning from arduous forced labour for the military, women are confronted with both the traditional tasks within the household as well as subsistence or income-generating labour tending crops. In effect, women are forced to take on the labour of three people as they work to fulfil tasks within the household, perform a full load of work in the fields, and serve the military in compulsory labour.

Women managing their households under the excessive 'taxation' demanded by military forces must forego other activities in order to invest more time in subsistence labour. Such constraints are even more severe in situations where the household lacks the contribution of labour from husbands or fathers. Cultural, religious and social roles are thus often abandoned as subsistence is prioritised. Women adapt their lives to accommodate the increased demand for their labour and in this way transcend traditional work roles. Their intensified involvement in subsistence labour, however, also undermines their cultural, religious and social roles.



A displaced woman villager at a hiding site in Lu Thaw township, Papun District cooks underneath a temporary shelter following SPDC soldiers' destruction of her home in 2006. *[Photo: KHRG]*

In situations of displacement, it is typically the women who decide what food and belongings must be taken and organise family members to carry it. Watching a village preparing for rapid evacuation as an SPDC column approaches is sometimes comparable to watching a well-organised military operation, as women household heads marshal their children, husbands and relatives to prioritise the essential belongings and get them out of the village with nothing crucial or any of the small children being left behind. Upon arrival at hiding sites, women forage for food and forest materials that can be used for building shelters. They care for children, sick and disabled relatives and fellow villagers and work in the construction and organisation of temporary schools for their children.



Displaced women villagers in Lu Thaw township construct temporary shelters after SPDC soldiers attacked and burned down their homes in 2006. [Photo: KHRG]

## Women as village heads

*“I have been village head in my village for four years now. I was elected by the villagers. The responsibility of the village head is to look after the villagers and to represent them. Before, the village heads in our village were men, but the SPDC soldiers tortured them, slapped, punched and kicked them until no man wanted or dared become village head any more. ... When the SPDC enters the village and demands porters, guides, or carts I usually go along with the villagers, because I am afraid they will abuse my villagers. Usually if the villagers who go with them cannot speak Burmese, they slap their faces, grab them by the hair and beat them.”*

– Naw L— (F, 34), village head, T— village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

In the context of militarisation, one of the primary functions of a village head is to manage the community's relations with local officers and soldiers. In this position, the village head conveys military demands to the rest of the village, takes responsibility for village behaviour, and often attempts to negotiate with

military personnel for the reduction of demands or the temperance of abuse. As a consequence of militarisation, there are particular vulnerabilities for men serving in this position, thus leading more women to take on this role. Men, for example, are often punished upon allegations of having KNU connections, providing support or shelter to opposition soldiers, or not preventing KNLA attacks on SPDC patrols. There is a perception amongst villagers that SPDC soldiers are less likely to severely abuse women, especially elderly women, because of cultural norms of respect for women and one's own mother, aunts and grandmothers. The relation between young male officers and middle-aged or elderly village women is conditioned by the traditional practice of respectfully calling older women *adaw* ('aunt') or *ahpwa* ('grandmother') in Burmese. In written order documents, SPDC officers frequently address village headwomen as 'Mother'. This puts the women in a strong negotiating position, and many of them exploit this to manipulate the officers into cancelling or reducing some of their demands. A further reason for the increasing numbers of village headwomen is the increased recognition in many communities of their leadership qualities, which has come about in response to more women taking on roles as heads of households as discussed above. Overall, therefore, more and more communities are choosing women to take on the role of village head.

*"The men don't dare to be the village head and women have to be village head because the Burmese killed [the previous] village headman, so the men don't dare to be the village head and ask women to be the village head. The SPDC [soldiers] asked us why men are not village heads, and we told them that people had killed one village headman already so people [men] don't dare to be the village head."*

- Naw M— (F, 32), H— village, Doooplaya District (March 2005)

*"All the village heads are women. The men don't dare to be village heads because the Burmese speak to the men angrily, and they cannot speak Burmese fluently so they don't want to talk to the Burmese. It is a little bit better for women, because we dare to talk to the Burmese. If the Burmese order us to go and meet with them, even if they send the letter in the night, we have to go. I've been village head for eight months now. The villagers elected me. My duty as village head is when they demand things I have to provide them, and if they order us to find things for them then we must find them. If they fine us we must pay them, even if we do not have the money we cannot deny them. The most difficult thing for me as village head has been when they demand bullock carts. If the Burmese demand bullock carts at night then I have to go looking for some, and it bothers the villagers because they have to do it too. Our village has 45 houses but I reported that there*

*are 30 houses [to lessen SPDC demands]. The villagers all work hill fields. We also have betelnut plantations and do a little logging to get income.”*

– Naw K— (F, 53), village head, N— village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

*“They [DKBA soldiers] tortured some men in 2003 when Moe Kyo came here... For this reason, men dare not become village heads and women have started serving as the village leaders. One woman had already become the village head before me, because men dare not say anything to them [the SPDC and DKBA soldiers].”*

- Naw B— (F, 45), K— village, Pa'an District (Nov 2005)

**Stamp:**

#663 Tactical Operations Command  
Military Operations Supervisory Group

To:

Mother [Village] Head  
B— Village

Send Son's [my] remaining 3 sacks of rice, beans, salt, fish paste, and oil from Mother's village to Meh Pa Li [Army] Camp tomorrow. [It is] Important. Son has no time. Tomorrow on 4.2.2004, Mother must come to Meh Pa Li together with Mother [village] Head from T— [village].

There are questions [you will have to answer].

**[Sd.]** 3/2004

Captain Mya Naing  
Meh Pa Li [Army] Camp

*“When [SPDC officer] Myo Maung was there, they used to demand two bullock carts from us once a month to carry all their rations from K'Lay Kee camp to Kyaikdon. The distance is so far that I cannot tell you how many hours it took. The bullocks that went looked bad and could barely walk by the time they arrived back at the village. We complained that it was difficult to find bullock carts to go, so he reduced it to one bullock cart. We complained about the distance, and they reduced the distance and said we'd only have to carry as far as Plaw Pa Taw. We asked them to pay the cart owner and they said they would pay, but when the owners arrived back they always said they hadn't been paid. So we villagers ourselves had to pay the owners 15,000 kyat each time to help them. ... Though we do this to help each other some people complain about it, but we must do what we must do.”*

– Naw K— (F, 53), village head, N— village, Dooplaya District (Jan 2006)

The strategy of selecting women as village heads has not been wholly successful in mitigating abuses, however, as those serving in this position are frequently threatened, detained and punished if their community consistently disobeys demands. Women as village heads therefore walk a fine line in challenging military officers, and must be very sensitive to how far a particular officer can be pushed. Physical abuse of women village heads is conducted with complete impunity, because it fits the military's programme of establishing strict hierarchies, with military over civilians – and therefore men over women.

<b>Year 2000</b> <b>[Armed Forces 55<sup>th</sup> Year Anniversary of Army Day logo]</b>	<b>Date:</b> <u>10/8/2000</u> <b>Place:</b> <u>[blank]</u>
<hr/>	
To: Daw aaaa (xxxx Village)	
<p>The Mother [Village] Head has sent the 5 villagers and [they] arrived yesterday and [we] are asking them to cut bamboo, but [they] didn't cut the bamboo and fled back [to their village]. I am very angry about this. As soon as you receive this letter, give quickly 10 villagers to me and include those 5 villagers [who fled the day before].</p> <p>We are treating the villagers from xxxx well, but think that we can't continue like this. We are the soldiers, if [you] want us to deal [with you] brutally, we can. [We are] Not satisfied at all on this matter.</p> <p>Then, Mother [Village] Head must come to get the recommendation [letter] for one of the above villagers; male, 18 years old, from Mother's village. In future, we will consider people who don't have a pass to be enemies and take action against [them], we have already informed all the columns of LIB #2. If a problem occurs, it is the responsibility of the villagers. [We] don't know whether Mother's village is testing us. If [you] dare to stay, stay. Later, do not say we are bad.</p> <p>We are dealing with Mother's villagers accordingly. [We] Asked for thatch and it didn't arrive. [We] Asked for people, but [they] didn't do anything and ran back. So, there is no reason to accommodate [you].</p> <p>If [you] dare stay without coming, stay [in your village]. That is all there is to tell.</p>	
<b><u>Stamp:</u></b> #63 Infantry Battalion #x Company	<b><u>[Sd.]</u></b> Company Commander #x Company Captain bbbb Frontline Infantry Battalion #63 yyyy Camp

*"It was the village head Naw Mu Yeh Ma from Thein Pa Lay. It was IB #97 led by Captain Thein Myint who ordered her to meet him, and when she was late arriving he hit her. He tortured her until she became unconscious. He punched her forehead between her eyebrows and she bled. He also kicked her and stomped on her belly. She was over 40 years old at that time and now she is 50 years old. She was treated at her home and we treated her. She did nothing wrong except that she didn't go on time when he ordered her to meet him."*

- U T— (M, 42), T— village, Dooplaya District (Dec 2002)

In order to mitigate the concentration of abuse on one villager and the personal debt that tends to be accumulated by village heads because villagers cannot gather enough money to pay extortion demands, some communities have begun rotating the position of village head every few months, or even as frequently as once per week. The individual is selected periodically from within the community to take on this position. Many women in a single village, even those quite young, therefore get the opportunity to take on the increased responsibility and authority but also the risk associated with this position.

*"Currently, we are changing the village head every three months and he or she will be selected by the villagers. Although the women in the village are working together, we don't have enough education. But we are trying as best as we can with the knowledge that we have gradually overcome [our difficulties] year by year. Before when we had a women's organisation the women were working together, but once the Burmese came to the village we stopped that, although I was not dismissed from the organisation. Most of the selected village heads are women."*

- Naw M— (F, 47), village secretary, T— village, Dooplaya district (May 2006)

*"Village heads are not directly appointed by SLORC but rather are elected by the villagers themselves. They are usually women, because men cannot survive the repeated beatings and punishments by the soldiers [whereas women are beaten and tortured somewhat less often]. Therefore, nobody wants to be a village head throughout the whole region. Some villages operate a rotation system for the position, and change the village head as often as every two weeks or every month. As a result, even 17- or 18-year-old girls sometimes act as village heads, but they can control the villagers and will be obeyed because everyone knows that they are being instructed and guided by the village elders, usually monastic leaders, and so they never misuse their powers."*

- Naw A— (F), B— village, Dooplaya District (1994)

*"Men dare not serve as the village head because when they go among the soldiers the soldiers hit, stomp, and beat them... sometimes women*

*are persecuted as well... We rotate the village head, and when your turn arrives you must do it, even those who are pregnant or have babies, and sometimes there is no time for the mothers to breastfeed their babies."*

- Saw B— (M, 38), T— village, Thaton District (Aug 2005)

Alternately, some women have held the position of village head for prolonged periods regardless of the associated dangers. In such situations, an individual woman is able to build up the respect of her community and of the soldiers posted nearby because of her success in mitigating military demands and other abuses.

*"I have been the village head for 18 years already. Villagers asked me to be the village head. I have faced many problems during these 18 years. In my village there are 480 villagers....They [SPDC soldiers] told our village heads that we couldn't control our villagers. We can control our villagers very well but our villagers have to do their own work and don't have so much time to work for them [the SPDC] all the time."*

- Daw T— (F, 52), village head, K— village, Thaton District (Nov 2005)

As women gain more experience in the role of village head they are developing more confidence in their authority and powers of negotiation. Many have therefore been able to actively employ their status as mothers and older women to intimidate officers and soldiers and thereby negotiate a reduction in military demands on the village. Such negotiation frequently involves exploiting traditional conceptions of respect for elderly women. In one case related to a KHRG field researcher, an SPDC officer operating in Papun District ordered an elderly village headwoman to send some villagers as 'guides' for his column. Knowing that the villagers would be forced to walk in front of the column as human minesweepers, the woman went to the officer and refused to ask her villagers to go. The officer claimed that the villagers would not be in danger, but the headwoman knew otherwise. As a compromise, she offered to go in their place, but only if the officer himself would walk hand in hand with her because she was afraid of landmines; that way, if either of them stepped on a mine they would die together. The officer, not willing to risk his own life and shamed by the elderly woman who was prepared to take such a risk, retracted his demand.

*"As we are village headwomen we don't always dare to go to serve with them [SPDC soldiers] as guides. We have told them 'we can guide you in the day time but it is not suitable for us to go at night time and we don't dare to go to guide you in the night time.' So we went to guide them in the day time and we monitored the situation as well."*

- Naw M— (F, 32), H— village, Doolaya District (March 2005)

*"We are constantly doing 'set tha' [forced labour as camp messengers and general servants]. I went to the SPDC soldiers and told them to stop demanding 'set tha' but they were unwilling to do so. I told them about the situation in my village, which is small and far away from the camp and the villagers are poor and must work daily to support their families. So, if they can stop doing 'set tha', it would be better to stop. But they said it would be impossible to stop 'set tha' because their camp is the biggest camp and the Military Operation Command is based there. Then they told me that though at first they had asked for two villagers for 'set tha', now they will only ask for one."*

- Daw A— (F, 43), village head, M— village, Papun District (Jan 2006)

*"I told them [SPDC soldiers] that if they demand too much from the villagers, the villagers will be unable to comply and that they must demand little by little because we cannot get all the work finished on time... After this, LIB #589 adjusted their demands on the villagers."*

- Daw T— (F, 57), village head, P— village, Papun District (Nov 2005)

The increasing prevalence of female village heads is significantly challenging the traditional conception of men as appropriate leaders. Karen women are showing themselves to be innovative and courageous in supporting their communities and mitigating the arbitrary demands of military personnel. The common knowledge that soldiers could kill these women with impunity only serves to strengthen their authority and the respect that they garner within their communities.

### ***This is not my duty...***

*"They send us written orders for things, and they even write what they'll do to the village head if the village fails to comply. Such-and-such amount at so-and-so time, they write it all. Sometimes they are so irritating we use them for toilet paper... They demanded our village give them 20 viss [32 kg] of betelnut, and 11 baskets of rice during last month. As for my village, when they demand 5 baskets I give them only 6 pyi [1 basket = 16 pyi]. They demanded 2,000 betelnuts. What do they want with betelnuts at this time of peace negotiations? I rebuked them telling them they should not lower the dignity of the Tatmadaw [military] like this. We have to be tactful and diplomatic like that when we cannot meet their demands. When I said that, we were exempted from giving it. If the young man who was killed had been from my village, the tragedy wouldn't have happened. But the village heads of those other villages were too afraid. They had been beaten so very often. Sure the other village headwomen are beaten. They have to go whenever they're summoned, even at midnight, and they can only come home at 4:00 a.m. Who knows what the soldiers would do to those headwomen at such hours of the night? People from my village don't have to suffer like that. If they call us, we won't go."*

"I'm only a village head, I'm not a guide. I know how to deal with both the government and the rebels when necessary. If they ask me to serve as their guide at night, I refuse them. This is not my duty. The younger village headwomen ask me to go along with them, they say they need my presence. How do their husbands feel seeing them going off with Burmese soldiers in the middle of the night? I told the Burmese Major frankly, 'Suppose your wife or daughter were called by a Karen rebel under similar circumstances, even for only one night, even if that Karen rebel actually did nothing to the women, how would you feel then?' And I was exempted. But the other women village heads have to go. Those women have to fan them while they're eating, they even have to wipe their mouths after their meals - these things have been witnessed by people. As for me, the soldiers won't even allow me to get close to them - maybe because I stink like anything, and those other women are pretty... I tell them, 'If you don't like it, I will report it to higher authorities.' I think they are a bit afraid of such confrontations. The soldiers are a bit afraid of our village because of this. As for the village on the other bank of the river, they are given hell and never have time to rest..."

"I'm overcome with disgust. I want to resign as village head. It would be alright if they listen to us, but they never listen to what we say. It's such an insult when SLORC says they'll slap my face, even though I'm the age of their mothers. They've never dared actually do it. They only threatened to shoot me one time, and that time it only ended up with them beating me. It's because when they said they'd shoot me I told them sarcastically, 'Do it then, since the SLORC issues you ammunition to shoot us.' They drew their knives to intimidate me, they said 'You old hag!', and one of them hit me with both hands on my shoulders. He shouted, 'If you were not the age of my mother, your cheeks would surely have burst!' They scolded me so much that it hurt my teeth [*a common figure of speech*]."

- Pee B— (F, 61), village head, T— village, Dooplaya District (1996)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> When this interview was conducted, Pee B— had been village head for many years. Six months later, however, the local Army Major ordered that she be replaced by a man as village head because he refused to deal with her any more. Excerpted from *SLORC in Kya-In and Kawkaireik Townships* (KHRG #96-07, February 1996), Interview #4.

## Women as educators and students

*“Because of the situation brought on by the SPDC, the role of the women in education has changed a little bit as women have had to fill the gap when men are absent and when they [men] are unable to take on this responsibility. There are not so many men [working as teachers] because they must engage in heavy labour. Because of the [military] oppression even though people don’t want to work [as teachers] women have to do this work.”*

– Naw Deborah, secretary, KED (Sep 2006)



A woman in K— village, Papun District facilitates a community discussion on the SPDC’s use of torture in April 2006. [Photo: KHRG]

As a consequence of the meagre SPDC spending on education, those schools and teachers located in Karen areas are frequently wholly, or at least partially, dependent on the contributions of local villagers. In some cases villages receive contributions to support their schools from KNU and KED funds or even Baptist missionaries operating out of the Irrawaddy delta. However, given the economic constraints on villagers’ own resources, they are unable to provide much extra support for the employment of teachers. Annual salaries for teachers in Karen villages can reach as high as 120,000 kyat (about US\$100) per year, but are usually only around 40,000 – 50,000 kyat (US\$30-40) per year. This remuneration is far from adequate to cover living costs. Teaching is thus not a viable alternative to subsistence agriculture. As men are the primary labourers in farm fields, they are typically unable or unwilling to take

up teaching which would prevent their families from adequately meeting subsistence needs. Teaching is therefore taken up more commonly by women as a financial supplement to the household’s income from farming as well as a service to the community. The increased deprivation of livelihood perpetrated

against villagers in Karen areas has led to more women becoming teachers. Moreover, the absence of men from villages due to flight, death or involvement in opposition movements has also contributed to shifting the proportions of women in education. The growing numbers of women teachers represents a move away from traditional roles where social norms ensured a preponderance of men working in formal education.



Women teachers at a village in Pa'an District hand out prizes to local students in 2006. [Photo: KHRG]

*"When I was in school, people knew that teachers did not get good salaries. So, men don't want to be teachers and most of the teachers are female. This has happened everywhere in Burma. Most of the teachers are female because the salary is low and cannot support the family. So, men cannot be teachers to support their family with that salary. So, most of the teachers are women. If the salary is good men will teach."*

- Naw S— (F, 22), N— village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)



A young woman teaches displaced children at a hiding site in Shwegyin township, Nyaunglebin District after repeated SPDC attacks forced them to flee their homes in 2006. [Photo: KHRG]

With the increasing employment of women as teachers, there has been a concurrent shift in perception regarding girls' education. Villagers feel that, while formal education may not have been necessary for women in the past, this is no longer the case. So while access to education is hindered by military abuses and restrictions on movement, local perceptions of women's right to, and need for, education has nevertheless grown.

*"Women think that education is important for them. Now most men think that education is important for women. Maybe in the past men discriminated against women because some of them said that women didn't need to study. In the past when I was in school our male friends looked down on us. Even our teachers looked down on us. They looked down on us by saying that women cannot use the education they have even if they study to a high level. It was a time when I was 14 years or 15 years old but now they don't think like this."*

- Naw T— (F, 28), T— village, Papun District (Sep 2006)



A group of students from T— village, Papun District pose for the camera in April 2006. Note the higher proportion of female students. [Photo: KHRG]

## Women as medics

*“In our area [and] in the village most of the medical workers are women. Some of the men don’t finish school because their parents cannot send them to school. So, they stop school and they cannot continue medical training. Some women finish tenth standard [high school] and if their family can [afford to support them], then they will support them to study medical training.”*

- Naw S— (F, 22), N— village, Thaton District (Sep 2006)

The health crisis in Karen areas, directly correlated to systematic military abuse as discussed earlier, has magnified villagers’ need for accessible medicine and medical treatment. The restrictions on movement, grossly inadequate medical provisions delivered through SPDC structures, and prohibitions against possession of medicine (on grounds that it could reach resistance forces) have however hindered any such access. As a consequence, villagers have increasingly relied on alternative health care providers. One such alternative has been the greater employment of traditional birth assistants (TBAs) to address a far wider range of ailments than childbirth. As the name suggests, TBAs employ traditional medicine and medical practices. The role of TBA is always filled by women, although many men also concoct herbal remedies. The traditional medicine that TBAs employ does not, however, always prove

beneficial or sufficient for the patient. In some cases, TBAs receive limited midwifery training in towns and larger villages. Independent Karen relief organisations such as the Backpack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT) and Free Burma Rangers (FBR) operating out of neighbouring Thailand as well as the KNU also provide basic medical and hygiene training to local village midwives and medics. The SPDC and in some cases the DKBA provide basic medical training, although they charge exorbitant fees and participation in the training is forced. While the primary duties of TBAs relate to assisting in childbirth, the needs of villagers have expanded their repertoire of skills. TBAs also often purchase medicine in towns which villagers can then buy from them during village visits. This is not the case, however, in areas like the hills of Papun, Nyaunglebin and Toungoo districts, where the SPDC has blockaded all medicines from entering the area and strictly prohibited its possession on the grounds that it may be given to the KNU/KNLA. It is only the villagers who suffer from this prohibition, because the Karen resistance smuggles its medicines in from Thailand, more so now that it has to treat many villagers suffering under the SPDC blockade.

*"We didn't have a clinic in our village and if we get sick, we take care of each other. Sometimes, we use traditional [remedies of] roots of trees and bamboo. Sometimes, we buy medicines from people who come and sell it in our village. The elder women who serve as traditional birth assistants take care of pregnant women."*

- Naw S— (F, 15), L— village, Toungoo District (March 2006)

*"The mountain Karen people take care of each other. The old people who used to do this work [as traditional birth assistants] could take care of the women in the birthing process."*

- Naw P— (F, 54), D— village, Papun District (Sep 2005)

Notwithstanding these increased responsibilities, TBAs have only limited qualifications and cannot treat serious injury or illness. The KNU, BPHWT and FBR also provide more intensive training as medics for local villagers. Many of these medic positions are filled by women, particularly if the medic is to remain stationary in a particular village. The perception that travel through Karen areas is highly dangerous leads to higher proportions of men taking on work in mobile medical units, while women remain in a given village to serve as the local medical provider.

*"We have already built a dispensary but there are no health workers and we have no medicine in it. If we get sick we must buy medicine from one of the lay-midwives in our village who has received training from the SPDC. Any serious cases must go to the hospital in town. The common diseases in our village are malaria, colds, coughs,*

*tuberculosis and now also cancer. Some villagers went to the refugee camp at B— [in Thailand, for treatment].”*

- Naw S— (F, 45), assistant village head, H— village, Thaton District (Oct 2005)

*“The SPDC ordered villagers to build a dispensary but it was useless because the SPDC did not supply anything like health workers or medicine after they built it. If villagers get sick they can get medicine from a midwife in our village. This midwife goes to Ka Ma Maung or Kyaik Kaw to buy her medicine. Her midwife certificate is from the SPDC because she got training in Pa’an.”*

- Naw K— (F, 55), village headwoman, H— village, Papun District (Oct 2005)

*“The [KNU] dispensary is situated in Toh Thay Der village and we have to take a half-day walk to get there. If we get sick, we must go to the dispensary and the health workers will give us treatment for free. But if we did not go, we must buy medicine in our village. For pregnant women in the village, if they are due, they give birth in the village with the help of traditional herbal medicine and traditional midwives.”*

- Naw D— (F, 30), T— village, Papun District (March 2006)

As villagers place a greater reliance on TBAs and local women medics, traditional notions of gender-specific occupations further erode. Women are increasingly seen as appropriate medical providers, knowledgeable and competent to deliver effective treatment for a wide array of ailments. This change in perception of women's roles has developed as a consequence of women's engagement with medical work in the context of a persistent health emergency primarily attributable to the SPDC's regular military abuses against villagers.

*“The people go to get the medicine. Sometimes we hear that they have prohibited medicine. Sometimes the people carry it secretly. The people don't dare to show that they carry it. The people can only carry a few tablets. When Thramu [‘female teacher’] L— went she brought a lot. She isn't afraid because she treats the villagers. When there isn't anyone going to buy medicine, they make it more expensive. We will die if we can't treat it. We don't dare to die.”*

-Naw T— (F, 43), village head, T— village, Thaton District (March 2002)

## Women as migrants

The movement of people throughout Karen areas as well as out of the country has been a consistent pattern interrelated with the process of militarisation. A decision to migrate to a neighbouring country may be based on the limited economic opportunities available locally, the general hardship of living as displaced people in hiding or the aversion to life in SPDC-controlled relocation sites and the regular abuses committed therein. As mentioned above, the availability of more effective medical care and educational opportunities also support the decision to travel to neighbouring Thailand. As villagers are motivated by a combination of factors, those choosing to escape the system of military abuse and travel to neighbouring countries in search of work cannot be pigeon-holed solely as economic migrants. Fear of further SPDC abuses and the desire to contribute financially to their family often prompt young women to go. In this context women are especially vulnerable to exploitation from human traffickers, corrupt government officials and unscrupulous employers.

*“There are many young women going to Thailand. As we are oppressed by the SPDC, we cannot do our work freely and we face a lot of troubles. The SPDC soldiers force us to porter for them in the daytime. They also arrest people whom they see at night time. We have no time left to work. If they [the women] stayed here, they would remain in fear of the SPDC, so they travelled to Bangkok. We thought that they would get money, so we let them go. They went there just to find money to solve their families’ problems and send money back to their parents because they could do nothing in the village. Although we can’t see them, they have phoned their parents and told them that they are doing well.”*

- Ma Y— (F, 55), K— village, Dooplaya District, (Nov 2002)

*“Young girls and young women have gone to Thailand to earn money and their parents are feeling sad about that... They have to look for daily wage labour. Some people have gone to find work in Thailand. There are about 50 people from Law Pa who went to Thailand to look for work. Some people went to Mae Sot and some went to Tee Kloh [near the Moei River]. Some people who went to look for jobs were 12 to 14 years old and some were about 30 years old and there was one person who was 40 years old. More women than men have gone.”*

- Daw W— (F, 39), village head, L— village, Dooplaya District (Nov 2002)

*“I have three daughters and one son. Now one of my daughters has gone to work in Thailand and she helps me by sending some money to me. She is my adopted daughter and she is 20 years old.”*

- Naw P— (F, 40), H— village, Dooplaya District (Aug 2006)

As women increasingly leave their home villages to cross the international border into neighbouring Thailand in search of work opportunities, family and community relations can no longer function along traditional patterns. Such disruptions similarly occur with internal displacement and refugee flows.

*"I cannot prepare things for the wedding for my children [two daughters] because they did not marry in the traditional way. They went to work in Thailand and when they [her daughters and sons-in-law] met, they fell in love and they stayed together."*

- Naw T— (F, 64), K— village, Dooplaya District, (Sep 2006)

As the traditional roles that women in Karen society have occupied have focused on intra-household labour, and thus infrequently involved travel outside of their home villages, cross-border migration in search of employment opportunities functions as yet another factor in altering gender roles in Karen society. Different skills are needed to cope in diverse settings and the risks of deception by human traffickers; deceitful employers; and corrupt government officials are manifold. While the potential of greater economic remuneration may provide new avenues for women's development, exploitation and direct personal dangers are ever-present concerns.

## **Women as support networks**

While traditional women's social networks are obstructed and broken up by military abuses and disruptions of community life, displaced communities have developed other types of networks to help them cope with their situation. Systematic attacks on rice fields and food stores lead many to rely heavily on the support of their fellow villagers. Traditional subsistence support networks are thus eroded while new forms, in which women play a leading role, are developing in adaptation to the differing challenges arising from military abuses and displacement.

*"Sometimes, if the food is not enough for the whole year, we buy some if we have money and if we don't have money, we must borrow from others. The people there are used to helping each other in such ways."*

- Naw P— (F, 30), T— village, Toungoo District (March 2006)

*"When I was young, people use to help each other in the hill field or flat field but when I married there was no tradition of helping each other and people used to hire others to work in the fields because at that time the military activities were so strong and people had to hurry to finish the harvest quickly."*

- Naw E— (F, 45), M— village, Dooplaya District, (Sep 2006)

*"I don't have specific work to earn my livelihood. I sell a small amount of desserts and snacks. If I don't have enough food, my friends help me and support me also. Most of my friends who support me are women. Some of my male friends also support me but as I am a widow if men support me, I worry that people will say some bad things to me. But nobody talks about me because most of my friends who help me are women... Traditionally in the community we go to help each other by working flat fields, like transplanting paddy for the harvest, but we don't go to help another village. The village leaders in the village arrange [for us] to help each other. Now we still practice this but the flat field owner does not cook for us. We must go to take our own food with us and when we finish the work in the evening they give us money."*

- Naw T— (F, 64), K— village, Dooplaya District, (Sep 2006)

Women's networks in displaced communities, like those in traditional sedentary village settings, have developed to address communal needs. As so many of the difficulties of displaced villagers relate to food insecurity, links with villages under SPDC control allow those in hiding somewhat more access to food sources. Often this functions through individual exchanges at the outskirts of villages. A further means of accessing food supplies has been through the development of clandestine 'jungle markets' where displaced villagers in hiding meet with those from SPDC-controlled villages from whom they can purchase rice and other necessities. In these situations, women more frequently participate in trade and social interaction between those in hiding and those in SPDC-controlled communities. Men meanwhile monitor for military encroachment and provide security. Sharing food between villagers and conducting illicit rice trading not only provide much needed resources for those seeking to evade military forces, but it also strengthens social bonds in Karen society. As plains Karen and those in urban areas can less effectively retain their language and cultural practices due to the SPDC's Burmanisation efforts, such networks provide them access to those maintaining more traditional ways, thereby strengthening the perpetuation of their culture.



Women from hill villages and plains villages defy the SPDC blockade on the movement of goods by trading at a covert 'jungle market' in Nyaunglebin District. *[Photo: KHRG]*



A woman sells cooking oil at a 'jungle market' in Mone township, Nyaunglebin District. *[Photo: KHRG]*

## VI. Legal Framework

International frameworks serve to standardise approaches to disparate humanitarian and human rights crises. In so far as they are drawn up external to the context in question, such programmes risk misrepresenting the individuality and denying the agency of Karen women living under militarisation. Nevertheless, legal obligations codified within international treaties and affirmations of the rights of women articulated in UN Security Council resolutions and General Assembly Declarations provide a basis for the support of individual Karen women in their resistance to military abuse. Where international law is applied in support of women's own strategies, such measures can serve the self-determination of those abused rather than imposing external notions of appropriate responses to abuse.

The SPDC military's violations of the rights of villagers in Karen areas, such as those described in Section IV above, are proscribed by numerous international treaties. These include, *inter alia*, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and Protocol II additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions (1977). These treaties, however, do not specifically address the rights of women *per se*. In any case, successive military regimes in Burma have defied the international trend towards signing and ratifying these conventions; thus evading any legally binding commitment to respect the rights enumerated therein. Nevertheless, international legal principles affirming the rights of Karen women, as women, are included within the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW) and the Forced Labour Convention of the International Labour Organisation (Convention 29). Moreover, Burma, having signed and ratified both CEDAW and ILO Convention 29, is a State Party to both conventions. Further international recognition of the rights of women pertinent to the militarisation of Karen areas rests in UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1674 and the UN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict. While such UN resolutions are non-binding, they reflect the acceptance of an international norm and can potentially function to bolster related international customary law, which is derived from State practice and the general belief that a rule is binding. The evidence above, and that presented in other KHRG reports, demonstrates that the SPDC is systematically and knowingly violating many of its obligations under international law. The effective implementation of these instruments would contribute to supporting the self-determination of women in Karen areas currently suffering under the constraints and violence of systematic military abuse.

Adopted on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1979, CEDAW provides for the removal of all political, economic, social, cultural, civil or other barriers to the development

and advancement of women. In particular it obliges States Parties to take “*all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms*” (Article 3). In 1997 Burma became a State Party and is therefore bound by the articles of CEDAW. Although the SPDC fails to meet numerous CEDAW obligations, the treaty’s relevance for this report is in the particularly constraining effects of abuse on the situation of Karen women. For example, Article 14.1 of the convention requires that

*“States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.”*

According to Article 3 of the treaty, as previously quoted, such measures include implementing legislation serving to guarantee women’s full freedom to support their families without undue interference. As shown by the evidence above however, the SPDC has been the main agent in eroding women’s ability to provide and care for their families. Along with the elimination of barriers on women’s achievement of their rights, CEDAW also require that States Parties submit periodic reports detailing measures taken in their implementation of the convention. To date Burma has submitted only one such report, on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1999. The SPDC has neglected to submit the country’s second required report which has been overdue since August 21<sup>st</sup> 2002.<sup>19</sup>

While international censure of the ubiquitous use of forced labour in Burma frequently cites the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, this treaty also contains specific provisions pertinent to the military’s exploitation of women in Karen areas. Rather than an absolute prohibition on the use of forced labour, the convention is more accurately a series of highly restrictive conditions delimiting where and when such labour may be employed. One of these conditions, listed under Article 11.1, limits the legitimate use of forced labour to “*adult able-bodied males*”. As Burma has been a State Party to the Forced Labour Convention since its ratification of the treaty in 1955, it is legally obliged to punish for a penal offence (Article 25) those who employ the forced labour of women. Only a few civil officials have ever been charged in Burma for using forced labour, and further prosecutions are currently blocked by the SPDC;

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<sup>19</sup> *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar*, Sixty-first session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 21<sup>st</sup> 2006, p. 19. Accessed at <http://www.un.org/ga/61/third/documentslist.shtml> on October 26<sup>th</sup> 2006.

meanwhile, it remains clear that the SPDC does not intend to allow any prosecutions against members of the military. As military personnel continue to exploit the forced labour of women, the SPDC is in contravention of its obligations under the Forced Labour Convention.

Two UN Security Council resolutions addressing the situation of women in the context of armed conflict are particularly relevant to military abuses against women in Karen areas, namely resolutions 1325 (Oct 31<sup>st</sup> 2000) and 1674 (April 28<sup>th</sup> 2006). While not legally binding instruments in their own right, these resolutions express the conviction of the Security Council and are backed by a strong international expectation of compliance. Moreover, these declarations draw upon pre-existing and legally binding international humanitarian and human rights law.

Under Article 10 of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, the UN Security Council, *“Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict.”* The continued sexual abuse, rape, torture, killing and other violence committed by SPDC troops with complete impunity in the context of military attacks against villagers in Karen State are in blatant contravention of the prohibitions in this resolution.

Through the adoption of resolution 1674 on the protection of civilians in areas of armed conflict, the UN Security Council has reaffirmed the international abhorrence to violence against non-combatants in conflict situations. In respect to women, under Article 19 of the resolution the Security Council *“Condemns in the strongest terms all sexual and other forms of violence committed against civilians in armed conflict, in particular women and children.”* As with resolution 1325, the SPDC in its ongoing military attacks against civilians, including women and girls, flouts UN Security Council calls for restraint.

As a UN General Assembly resolution, the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (Dec 14<sup>th</sup> 1974) is also an affirmation of international conviction. In particular relevance to the situation of Karen women living under regular military abuse, Article 6 of the Declaration demands that:

*“Women and children belonging to the civilian population and finding themselves in circumstances of emergency and armed conflict in the struggle for peace, self-determination, national liberation and independence, or who live in occupied territories, shall not be deprived of shelter, food, medical aid or other inalienable rights, in accordance with the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the*

*International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child or other instruments of international law.”*

The SPDC military's destruction and confiscation of property as well as its obstruction of access to food and medical treatment blatantly violates the rights of Karen women as articulated in this declaration.

The SPDC's continued abuse of women and disregard of the particular effects that the overall system of abuse has on women are in clear violation of the country's international legal obligations codified within CEDAW and the 1930 ILO Forced Labour Convention. The abuses and effects of militarisation on Karen women moreover flout repeated international affirmations of the inherent rights of women to be free from abuse and free from the structures that support such abuse. The effective enforcement of the international legal measures and declarations listed here would go a long way in supporting Karen and other women in their responses and resistance to military abuse. Such international human rights standards are therefore relevant, not because they dictate the most appropriate response to abuse, but rather because they vindicate the efforts of local women in developing and implementing their own, contextually appropriate resistance strategies.

## VII. Conclusion

Through ongoing attacks against villages in Karen State, the SPDC has been systematically pushing to expand and consolidate military control. However, the country's current economic stagnation, financial mismanagement and rapid expansion of the army have prevented the SPDC from fully funding such operations. The militarisation of Karen territory has therefore been dependent on the exploitation of the local civilian population to both compensate for inadequate military funds and undermine civilian resistance to military rule. As a consequence, villagers in this area confront daily abuse at the hands of armed forces. Nevertheless, Karen and other villagers have not been passive victims to such abuse. Through their responses and resistance strategies, local villagers have been actively involved in challenging the consolidation of military control over their homeland.

Soldiers operating in Karen areas commit a wide array of human rights violations indiscriminately against both male and female civilians, as well as some abuses which specifically target women. Even for abuses which do not specifically target women however, gender roles within Karen society lead to differing effects between men and women. The social and cultural expectations on Karen women furthermore lead them to respond to abuses in particular ways. Responding to and resisting militarisation and its related human rights violations lead women to challenge traditional gender norms, thereby redefining their identities and transcending the historical roles of women in Karen society. Many women across Karen society have not only expanded their participation in family income generation and staple food production, they have also taken on new roles in the community as village leaders, spokespersons, interlocutors with the military, teachers, medics, and a variety of others. Karen women's responses to abuse, however, have not been uniform. Rather, the multiple, often overlapping roles these women occupy have led to contextually specific strategies through which they work to evade and mitigate violations of their rights.

The changing roles of women in Karen society have been both liberating and constraining on their freedom. In so far as they allow women to explore options previously denied to them, they are liberating. However, where these changing roles undermine women's security of person and livelihood and place increasing burdens on them, they constrain their freedom to negotiate their roles and the direction of their lives. In this light, external efforts to assist Karen women are most appropriate where they support the responses these women are already employing and thereby broaden their capacity to act.

In a context of abuse where villagers are systematically denied a voice, recognition of their agency is a crucial component in supporting their struggle

to claim their rights. Governmental, non-governmental and multilateral agencies seeking to assist these individuals would do well to listen to their concerns and allow them to dictate the direction of any plans for relief and development. Where such agencies rely on state-centric approaches and state-based implementation, they merely perpetuate the disenfranchisement of local peoples. The common representation of Karen women as victims without the knowledge or means to help themselves supports such an approach. Through their actions, however, these women defy such classification. Rather, they are conscious actors whose response strategies point to the direction in which they want their society to develop; and as such, they are political. To dismiss their concerns and to ignore the strategies they already use to maintain control over their lives is to deny them their rights.

The international media's predilection for short pithy incidents of human rights abuses, and the advertising of Burma's 'humanitarian emergency' by aid agencies in their unceasing quest for more funds, both occur at the expense of local narratives and tend to perpetuate this stereotype of the helpless victim. In this way they can lead to the implementation of inappropriate programmes that undermine the strategies local peoples employ in response to abuse. External agencies looking to support Karen women in their struggle to claim their rights need to understand first what these women are saying about their situation and what strategies they are already employing in response to abuse. By supporting local response strategies those external to the context can avoid implementing inappropriate intervention that merely perpetuates the denial of their rights.

Only by listening to the voices of those struggling to claim their rights can outside parties develop appropriate strategies to support them. To this end Karen women must be seen as individuals in their own right with unique concerns and response strategies, rather than helpless victims or inherent components of the State. Given the brutality of the regular military abuse committed against Karen women, external support is sorely needed. No response to the militarisation of Karen areas, however, will be sustainable so long as systematic abuse remains. Tangible direct assistance for these women in their responses to abuse must therefore be backed by concerted efforts to end the root structures of abuse. In this way Karen women may be able to return to their homes, free from violence and impossible demands, in a context conducive to freely negotiating their roles in the family, community and wider society.



*"I'm only a village head, I'm not a guide. I know how to deal with both the government and the rebels when necessary. If they ask me to serve as their guide at night, I refuse them. This is not my duty. The younger village head-women ask me to go along with them, they say they need my presence. How do their husbands feel seeing them going off with Burmese soldiers in the middle of the night? I told the Burmese Major frankly, 'Suppose your wife or daughter were called by a Karen rebel under similar circumstances, even for only one night, even if that Karen rebel actually did nothing to the women, how would you feel then?' And I was exempted. But the other women village heads have to go. Those women have to fan them while they're eating, they even have to wipe their mouths after their meals - these things have been witnessed by people. As for me, the soldiers won't even allow me to get close to them - maybe because I stink like anything, and those other women are pretty... I tell them, 'If you don't like it, I will report it to higher authorities.' I think they are a bit afraid of such confrontations. The soldiers are a bit afraid of our village because of this."*

- Pee B--- (F, 61), village head, T--- village, Dooplaya District

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) was founded in 1992 and documents the situation of villagers and townspeople in rural Burma through their direct testimonies, supported by photographic and other evidence. KHRG operates completely independently and is not affiliated with any political or other organisation. Examples of KHRG's work can be seen on the World Wide Web at <http://www.khrg.org>. KHRG can be contacted by email at [khrg@khrg.org](mailto:khrg@khrg.org).